



LICENSED TO  SACRAMENTO STATE



DEE ALIMBINI is the administrator for child welfare and attendance for Stockton Unified School District. We went with her to Edison High School to see the AdvancePath Academy, a self-paced credit recovery program on campus. We toured the large computer lab where students were quietly engaged in their studies.

CapRadio spoke with Alimbini about Stockton Unified School District's policies and procedures for reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates.

Dee Alimbini: Stockton Unified has been very forward thinking in trying to establish as many options for kids as we can. AdvancePath is one of our options. We started this (program) that devastating year (2006-2007) where we were told we had a 54% dropout rate. It caused us to really look at our processes and our procedures and make changes. We started adding all of these educational options for our students. Now I think the last reported dropout rate was 19.3% so that's (a) pretty huge drop.

CapRadio: You've been here a long time.

Alimbini: This is my 29th year in the district, and I've always been in high schools. But we really started to dig into our data. We found that some of the ways that we were exiting students from our programs, we were using incorrect coding.

That's why we setup a center in the district office, *Reclaiming our Youth* we called it, and we started on the phone, calling kids, calling school districts and verifying where they were. And so we were able to report an accurate number of about 17%. We do have some dropouts, you know?

Stockton is a large community; we're the largest school district in the community and we have kids that face incredible challenges.

We had a continuation high school where students can voluntarily enroll, and then we added Stockton High School. We then have added this Advanced Path program. And school started this week, the 13th, and all week long I've been meeting with students, facilitating their enrollment.

We now have a list of students who didn't come on the first day. We now don't call it *Reclaiming Our Youth*; we call it *Get Them Back on the Bus*, even though high school students don't ride school buses to school. But we're getting our kids, K-12, back in school if they didn't come on the first day or the second day. So we're making home visits. I have all these little white cars that go out like little beetles all over the community, and they're visiting homes.

We had some seventh graders that didn't have their TDAP vaccination yet. Put them in the car, took them to our health services department, they got their TDAP. The parent came with them. And took them to the school to enroll. It was that simple. We're just constantly working . . . looking at the barriers and then kicking them over.

CapRadio: **And is that a change in attitude from the District, or is that a realization of the need?**

Alimbini: All of us went into education because we wanted to help kids; that's the bottom line. We just didn't always have the tools that we needed to help kids. So it was never a matter of caring whether they were there or not. It was what can we do with them? How can we help them? And our county office operates a school, a series of schools, the One program. My goal is to keep kids in our district, because I think we are best equipped to deal with the kids in Stockton and Stockton Unified. It isn't sending them out to some satellite school somewhere; it's keeping them at home and then wrapping services around them to help them be successful.

And we have an awesome parent empowerment person now who's meeting with parents. She and I have been working together in arranging seminars for parents. We provide transportation to parents to get their kids to school. I buy bus passes so parents and small children can get to school if they're out of school bus range. So every time we see a gap, we try to fill it.

Alimbini: One of the things that we've done is we have really limit(ed) police involvement in truancy. We have our own police force, and we're a small city. There're 37,000 kids and I think 5,000 employees so we're like a small city within a city. So our police need to focus on relationships with our students. You'll see there's an officer here right now, and they go out and interact with the students. But they're not writing citations for truancy. We're not referring these kids to juvenile court, because everything you read will tell you that once a student enters that juvenile justice system, you almost guarantee disengagement from school and potentially dropping out.

And I can't bear the thought of a student going to our juvenile detention facility because they missed 20 days of school and then mouthed off to the officer or something like that. So I've worked with our police chief to reduce the number of citations that are written. Now if we see kids that we know are supposed to be in school, they get in the car and we take them to school and we turn them over to the assistant principals at the school sites and say teach them. They're here now. They're late, but they're here now.

We also have worked suspensions and expulsions, and of course I'm helped along by changes in legislation. We have to look at all these interventions that we can provide. So no student is ever brought to me for expulsion unless it's a very serious offense, or the school can prove to me they've exhausted every single effort, every single intervention, from counseling to academic intervention because sometimes kids just act up because they don't get it. They don't know what's happening in the classroom. I probably acted up in my algebra classroom, I know I did, when I was in high school because I never got it.

But it's just a matter of if we have lowered our suspension rate, we've dramatically lowered our expulsion rate. I have a visual. We keep all our expulsion files in old filing cabinets. So four years ago it was a four drawer alphabetically expulsions, then three, then two, then this last year three quarters of a drawer for expulsions. That's just a visual of how we have reduced excluding kids from our schools. But our campuses have to be safe and just sometimes a situation arises where a student needs to go someplace else to go to school because they're unsafe for everyone else at the school. And we do not dispute that unsafe kids do not belong on the campus.

CapRadio: Why does traditional school not work for some kids?

Alimbini: Some kids drop out of our large schools because they are just too big. When you come from elementary schools, you've been with these same kids, K-8, pre-K-8, and 600, 700 kids or 300 kids, and then all of a sudden you're faced with 2,500 kids or up to 3,000 kids? And you're just standing in the hallway and people are going back and forth. It's scary for some kids. And so unless they come with their little group of friends or they immediately make a bond with an adult at the school, which is something else that we are working very hard at making sure every child has an adult they can go to, it's too much. And so you miss one day, then it's easy to miss a second day, then a third day. And pretty soon you're so far behind and your parents may not be home; they may be at work.

We have a significant population of kids whose parents work in the fields. So they leave before dawn and assume their children are coming to

school, and then find out later on that they're not. That's why we have some small high schools now. We have an early college academy. Those students are earning a high school diploma and an AA degree. We have a health careers academy, which is going to feed right into this new prison hospital that's south of town. And then we have Pacific Law Academy for students who are interested in the law profession. And we have a lot of other small schools in our thinking, in our planning. We just have to have locations for them. But I know we're going to have the kids to fill them.

CapRadio: Can you talk about the actual dropout rate? What are the numbers like for the last few years?

Alimbini: Well, in 2008 and '09, we had posted for the previous year, 17.7%. And it went up to almost 35%. So that was an uh-oh, now what are we going to do? Went back to work, ramped up the efforts that we had already started, then it went down to 27% and then 24% and 2011 and '12 was 19%. Which seems like a lot of kids in a 37,000 students district. However, it doesn't translate to that many kids. And then all the time we're still looking for them. And some of them just didn't pass their exit exams. They go to our Adult Ed, they pass the exit exams, two years later they're awarded a high school diploma. So then the data has to be corrected back for that. It's just an ongoing, continuous effort to find them, fix them, educate them, graduate them.

CapRadio: What do you think it's going to look like for last year?

Alimbini: I don't know, we brought a lot of kids back at the beginning of the year. That's all we're doing right now, and we'll be doing this through the middle of September. I think it's going to go down, because we had more graduates last year. We had more graduates last year than we have in the last couple of years. So that just corresponds.

CapRadio: Can you speak a little bit about how the tracking of individual students, the Cal-pads?

Alimbini: You get the kid's state identifier. I go on Cal-pads. Oh, last school of enrollment? Lodi High School. Okay, well, Stagg then Lodi. They're enrolled; they're not a dropout. I know that we are anticipating another drop in the number of kids that we have actually lost – lost to dropping out, not lost to other districts.

CapRadio: And how were they counted before that? How did you estimate your dropout or graduation?

Alimbini: We just figured out who wasn't there on the first day and started looking for them, and if we couldn't find them then after calling all over the place

we assumed they were probably not in school somewhere. When they leave the state, the state no longer tracks them.

CapRadio: Private school?

Alimbini: They go to private school, we can call St. Mary's High School, which is a private school, or any of our charter high schools, and we share lists. If they're looking for one of their kids, we may have them; they may have our kid. So just keeping track of that. And then, just correcting our student information system to show where they went. And Adult Ed, we go over there and use their computers because they're in a different information system than we are. Oh, there's so-and-so. We've built relationships in our county with all of the other school districts. I meet with all the CWA administrators for the whole county on a regular basis. We talk about suspensions and expulsions; we share best practices. Anytime you can have a professional, collegial community to talk about things, I've gotten a lot of good ideas from other districts. I think they've gotten some good ideas from us.

CapRadio: When people hear that we're going to do a documentary about the Central Valley, they're going to think Stockton. They're going to (think), Stockton schools.

Alimbini: Well, the community as a whole, the foreclosure capital, the high murder rate. But because we are such a large school district and we serve so many families, I think Stockton Unified and our practices are key to turning our community around. I think it's already showing. We have all of these different people that can come in and help kids, kids who are involved in gangs; kids who are hungry; kids who don't have a place to live. It's more dealing with the barriers.

Our four comprehensive high schools each have an afterschool program that's open until 6:00. It's open entry; come and go. You come today, not come tomorrow. There's tutoring, there's enrichment. We are operating in two of them our peer court pilot in the afterschool program. One of them's here, and so we're going to get that off the ground in the next couple of weeks. But that's another thing. Instead of getting in trouble and getting suspended, you go to peer court and truly are judged by a jury of your peers. They're a little harder on the kids than the assistant principal might be, but we're working with them. We told them no gavels, no robes. It's a circle. We're going to make things right here. We're not here to be punitive.

So that's something else. I mean when a kid gets in trouble for a minor issue and the school is inclined to suspend, instead they're sending them to peer court where they're offering mediation so that they're still on

campus. And most kids don't fight over anything really serious; they just fight over dumb things, or they act up in class. When you're required to go stand in front of your class and say I'm really sorry, Mrs. Alimbini. I did not mean to be disrespectful and use my cell phone or throw my book on the floor or whatever, it's pretty powerful to ask a student to do that. But they did it; they did it last year. Then they built that relationship with the adult.

The Department of Justice Community Relations Service (came to Stockton Unified) and conducted forums with kids. Trained a bunch of facilitators, community and district people and each facilitator had a small group of kids. And they actually got to say what bugs them. What's wrong? And then from all of that data that we collected, just from the student voice, we've already made some changes in the schools.

And some of it has to do with lunch. What's for lunch? It's ongoing now. We're using the PLUS program. It's Peer Leaders United Students. It's kind of like a roving, rolling forum for students. Some students are trained as the PLUS leaders and then they bring in different kids every month. They listen to them; they take notes. It's kid-led. It's not an adult leading it. And they find out what the issues are, and then working with school administration and district office people, try to fix those issues so that they want to stay in school. They don't want to leave.

CapRadio: Can you talk about some of the barriers that exist either in the community and families, and then you see those in school? Barriers to education and to graduation.

Alimbini: Well, some of our parents had bad experiences in schools and so they don't want to come to the school to talk to anyone. Or they have a language barrier or they're very proud people but they don't feel like they can go talk to a professional in an office about their child. And so they are reluctant to come, so we have to go to them. That's where Kanitha Stevens, our parent empowerment person, comes in. She's bringing the parents in, all different kinds of parents. So we're giving student voice; we're also giving parent voice and then listening to what they say. Not just giving them lip service, but actually we're listening to what they have to say. And then we're going to be making changes. As things come up, we can be very fluid. Even if we are a small city, we can be very fluid in our practices.

CapRadio: So when you're thinking about success and lowering that dropout rate, how else are you thinking of measuring success and what would that look like for Stockton Unified?

Alimbini: I tend to measure success by one student at a time, because I deal with one student at a time in my position. Before I left to come here (to this

interview), I had an 18-year-old in my office who had been expelled three years ago and he went to one school out of the county. He spent some time in juvenile hall. And then about six months after his expulsion, he stopped going to school. He started working at the flea market and today he came in, because he's about to become a father. And his girlfriend attends one of our high schools. He said, I need to go back to school. I don't have a diploma. I was expelled. And everyone knows if you get expelled, it's harder to get back into school.

So we looked at his transcript. We always include a counseling piece. He'd actually gone through one of our gang intervention non-profits in the community, and he certainly didn't look like a student who had ever been gang involved. And actually I recommended that he contact AdvancePath. He really only needs about 80 credits to graduate. We removed some of the electives, lowered our graduation credit requirement, so he's now within reach and he can do it this year.

So when I measure it, I measure it kid-by-kid. And when I meet everyday at the end of the day with my staff and we talk about all of the different things that happened: I took seven people to get a TDAP and I referred five kids to AdvancePath, five kids to Stockton High School and then we verify enrollment, drive the parents to school to get them enrolled and do all of those things.

So I know there are numbers and our research department keeps very close track of testing date and all that stuff, but I don't do that. I'm just looking at that kid that's in front of me at that moment, and what can I do to help him or her? And help this mother understand the importance of school. It's people; it's kids; it's parents.

CapRadio: Are there any other sort of Stockton-specific challenges that you face as a school district that you didn't mention already?

Alimbini: Well, I talked a little bit about we had a very high crime rate for the last couple of years, and that's calming down. I think that's due to the work of our city police and the way that they've changed their policing measurements. And then, we're working also with the county board of supervisors, because a significant part of our district isn't even in the city of Stockton; it's in the county. And so they have expressed an interest in how we're going to get kids in school and so they've come to (Superintendent) Dr. Lauder and we've met with three county board of supervisors members. So people are coming to help us.

It's very difficult to buy a house right now because there aren't as many houses available. Our foreclosure rate has decreased. People are feeling

more comfortable in Stockton again. People are moving to Stockton. We've hired a lot of new people who've wanted to move to Stockton.

But we do have a lot of parents who are in prison. We have parents serving hard time in prison. And for them to try to stay involved with their children . . . I do have a correspondence going with a gentleman at San Quentin because he has a high school aged student. He's not going to get to come to graduation, but he's already talking to me about I need balloons. How can I get balloons to my child? I'm going to end up buying balloons for this man in San Quentin so that his high school student, when he graduates, gets balloons.

I send him the student's records. I send him the transcript every year so he knows the grades and everything. He doesn't have a lot of contact with his child. It's a transportation barrier. But when we start feeling the needs of the parents, then we're not going to have so many problems with attendance and discipline issues in our district because the parents are going to be on the same team as we are, even if they didn't graduate from high school. And they can go to our Adult Ed. They can go get a high school diploma.

I always recommend that to parents: be a model; be a role model for your child. You go get your high school diploma or your GED from Adult Ed while they're attending Edison or Chavez or Stagg or Franklin. And then you do your homework together. You know, work together on it. And that way you're modeling what's important. Your child can't argue that school's not important if you're going to school too.

CapRadio: You sound very optimistic.

Alimbini: I am optimistic. If I wasn't optimistic, I couldn't come to work every day. I couldn't do the things that I do, because I cry. I walk into my office and I cry when I've talked to this family and I know that the brick wall is so high that how are they going to get over it? And it's my job to take it apart brick-by-brick. It's overwhelming, but I still come to work. I get up every morning at 4:30 and I come to work every day because I know that there's kids waiting for me. There are kids waiting for my staff and there are kids in every classroom waiting for that adult to connect with them and give them what they need, work with them and help them. And make them feel welcome. Sometimes they're not welcome at home or they're not welcome within their own family. But if they're welcome in their classroom, that's where they're going to go. That's why our afterschool programs are successful, because kids come. They want that adult support and positive strokes.

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