

# DREAM Academy: Financial Leadership for At-Risk Students

*With student well-being as the focus, this Illinois district pulled resources and funding together to implement a program that serves the whole child.*

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COURTESY OF COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 300, ALGONQUIN, ILLINOIS

*One of CUSD 300's primary areas of focus is to improve academic outcomes for the district's most at-risk students.*

**S**chool business officials are frequently challenged to fund initiatives to support students' educational needs for which requests outnumber available dollars.

Community Unit School District 300 in Algonquin, Illinois, serves 14 communities with varying levels of socioeconomic status in 26 schools. For the 2020 school year, the schools' federal free and reduced-price lunch

status ranges from 19% to 89%, explained by the fact that each of the district's three high schools is located in a different setting: urban, suburban, and rural.

Because D300 is a unit school district, it is challenged to provide the necessary resources to support a diverse student population and to differentiate services without getting pushback from the community.

During the superintendent's first

year with Community Unit School District 300 (D300), he proposed more than 100 initiatives that required additional funding. One of his primary areas of focus was to improve academic outcomes for the district's most at-risk students. As the district's chief operating officer who has lived and worked in D300 for more than 30 years, I understood the need to focus on at-risk students and wanted to find ways to support his vision.



*The district provides students with exposure to careers such as broadcasting.*



*Students learn not only career skills, but positive life skills as well.*

We immediately sprang into action to get the support of the school board to develop what we termed “the DREAM Academy” at our lowest-performing elementary school.

## Board Support and Funding

The DREAM Academy would bridge and extend the services provided by several initiatives that were already in place.

In 2015, the district received a federal preschool expansion grant to provide full-day preschool programming for four-year-olds in Title I schools to help prepare them for kindergarten. We used the Title I funds to provide additional instruction time by extending the kindergarten program from a half day to a full day.

In 2017, a local food pantry was given space at our Title I middle school to address food insecurity for students and their families. As part of another initiative, the district received state grant funding to provide alternative learning to support students in grades 6–12 who are at risk of academic failure or dropping out.

With school board support, the administrative team turned to securing the \$600,000 to fund the program services. The district’s

Medicaid reimbursement for allowable expenditures offset the cost and expanded the state-funded alternative learning grant to include the fourth- and fifth-grade students. We also negotiated a 10% discount with the vendor who would be providing the services. That left us with roughly \$300,000 to fund.

Because this program was a priority for the board and superintendent, the administrative team collectively found funding in their budgets to support the remaining amount. The DREAM Academy would become a reality.



*Student on-task behavior has increased significantly since the district implemented the DREAM Academy.*

## DREAM Academy Performance Data

Two years later, we are beginning to see the benefits of the DREAM program. Most impressive are the individual student stories as well as the overall school data.

As an example, one student who was referred to the program had seven different ACEs: separation of parents, incarcerated/absent father, loss of family members to death or homicide, a sibling struggling with behavioral/mental health issues, history of emotional abuse, potential history of physical abuse, and a mother who was working two jobs to support the family.

The student was referred to the program because of verbal aggression, physical aggression, suicidal ideations, and lack of academic engagement. Since participating in the program, the student’s work completion has increased from 15% to 55% and his time in the general education classroom has increased from 10% to 85%. He no longer makes daily threats and requires no additional intervention in the classroom.

From a schoolwide perspective, on-task behavior has increased from 3 minutes to 15–17 minutes—a 500%–567% increase. The average number of behavioral referrals per month has fallen from 52 to 31.