

Crossing the Bridge

*Hamilton County Family and Children First Council
Cincinnati, Ohio*

Ninth grade is pivotal. Much of what happens throughout high school is influenced by the start students get academically, socially, and emotionally. To put students at Aiken High School in Cincinnati on a sound footing, the Hamilton County Family and Children First Council sponsors Crossing the Bridge, a two-week transition program.

In half-day sessions during the two weeks before school officially begins, the incoming ninth graders spend time on academics, learn study skills, get acquainted with school procedures, find their way around the building, and tackle social skills, such as conflict management, healthy relationships, and decision making.

“Our Crossing the Bridge program is a comprehensive program designed to provide students and parents with opportunities to assist with the improvement of student outcomes,” said the council coordinator who works with Aiken High.

Parents are also included. During the second week of the Summer Bridge, parents and guardians are invited to a family dinner and orientation. Parents can tour the building, meet teachers, and learn about extracurricular activities and facts of high school life, such as grade point averages and what it takes to get credit for courses.

The Bridge program does not end when school starts, either. Ninth graders who would like to have a “big brother” or “big sister” are paired with older students, and all ninth graders continue to meet throughout the school year for

team-building classes. Social service providers teach these sessions, focusing on social skills, conflict management, goal setting, and violence prevention.

The Bridge program has lofty goals:

- Increase student achievement and decrease the drop-out rate
- Increase parent involvement in high school
- Increase social skills and enhance positive behavior of students

To meet these goals, Crossing the Bridge enlists the whole community, drawing on resources from colleges, private industry, and social service agencies. The council serves as a catalyst in this and many other projects in 11 schools in the Cincinnati area, with an emphasis on coordinating social services for families and children, combining resources, and eliminating duplication of services. More than 80 organizations make up the council.

At Aiken, the council coordinator and the principal planned the Bridge program to reduce the large number of students who regularly repeat ninth grade, and the school’s high drop-out rate. Aiken teachers and area social service providers planned the curricula; engineers from General Electric and engineering students from Ohio State University developed hands-on science projects and worked with students; the vice provost of The University of Cincinnati lectured and demonstrated the study of bones in solving crimes; and local students worked as junior staff members and served as big brothers and sisters. Several of these partners helped the school pick up the \$14,000 cost of the program.

About 180 students and 260 parents and guardians took part in this year's program. More than 30 community members and 15 school staff members were involved as well.

The biggest challenge is convincing students and their parents of the importance of beginning school two weeks early—even for half days. The school met this challenge by enlisting upperclass students to call incoming ninth graders to talk about the program. This direct phone contact was a big success.

Some parents did not have to be convinced: "This program is the main reason we selected this school for our son," said one. And even students who may have been reluctant to attend saw the value of the program. "I'm glad I came in the summer because I already knew a lot of stuff when the school year began," said one student. "I like this anger management stuff; I used it at home a lot this year, and I get along better now with my mom," commented another.

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