



Comprehensive DAEP uses positive intervention to redirect wayward students

by Elizabeth Millard



Greg Poole,
superintendent

When middle school and high school students at Barbers Hill ISD behave in a way that requires disciplinary intervention, they're in luck.

Five years ago, the district developed the Eagle Positive Intervention Center (EPIC), a DAEP program designed to assist students behaviorally, academically and socially, with a focus on getting students back on the road to success — oftentimes leading a student to that road for the first time.

Before EPIC was put into place, the district sent wayward students to a program that was shared by eight other districts. The focus there was on discipline, says EPIC Principal Jim Bergstrom.

"They were expected to 'do their time' and return rehabilitated," says Bergstrom. "Unfortunately, in most instances, students returned to their home campuses further behind academically with little or no change in their behavior. Little was accomplished."

Barbers Hill ISD Superintendent Greg Poole adds that a challenging cycle with the old system was that first-year DAEP teachers would get the most difficult students and their motivation would plummet quickly.

"Being in DAEP almost seemed like a punishment for teachers," says Poole, who began envisioning a program that would pair enthusiastic, skilled teachers with at-risk students, making the interventions a more positive experience for everyone.

"Now we put the best we have in EPIC, the teachers who can excel in a one-to-one environment," he says. "That way, we're not babysitting the kids who need discipline; we're teaching them."

Welcome to EPIC

When students arrive at the EPIC building — located two blocks from the high school — they're met by Bergstrom, as well as a full-time teacher, a half-time teacher and an instructional aide. The small team leads the entire school day, from language arts to math and science. They also create student-tailored learning plans, complete with goal setting and subsequent follow-up once the students return to their home campuses. EPIC can serve up to 25 students at one time; although, enrollment per day usually hovers between 10 and 15 students, with a typical stay around 10 days.

"When kids are sent here, I do an intake where I tell them, 'I want you to be at or above where your grades are currently,'" says Bergstrom. "They should go back to their home campuses better off than when they came in here."

Every day begins with a 15-minute character development lesson, in which students talk about focus, vision and integrity, as well as their goals for the day. Their home campus teachers provide assignments and materials, so EPIC can give students the same work they would be doing in their regular classrooms.

EPIC issues weekly academic progress reports to parents, and home campus



Eagle Positive
Intervention Center
Principal Jim Bergstrom
leads a class in character
development.



This proud Barbers Hill ISD graduate returned to school after having dropped out for more than a year. Due to disciplinary reasons, he was placed at the district's Eagle Positive Intervention Center, and in one semester he completed the necessary requirements to receive his high school diploma. Pictured left to right are Fred Skinner, Barbers Hill ISD board president; Tom Holland, Barbers Hill High School principal; Elizabeth Torres, EPIC instructional aide; Melissa Frazier, EPIC teacher; EPIC graduate; Jim Bergstrom, EPIC principal; and Bruce Taylor, Barbers Hill High School assistant principal.

teachers are expected to visit their students at least once while the students are at EPIC. When students are getting ready to leave EPIC, they have to write letters to their parents, teachers and administrators that describe what they have learned about themselves, what their academic and behavioral goals will be from that point and how they plan to accomplish those goals.

Students also are expected to do one random act of kindness every day, and they must fill out a form describing those actions. They might bring canned goods for EPIC's food pantry, read to a younger sibling or help their parents cook dinner. If they keep up with kind acts and maintain good behavior, the students can "earn back days" and leave EPIC sooner than planned.

Says Bergstrom: "This is a great way to get them to think about the community and how they can effect change. We've seen kids get excited about making a difference in these small ways, and we think that translates to better behavior choices."

After students return to their home campuses, Bergstrom doesn't write them off. He makes four follow-up visits — at one week, two weeks, three weeks and six weeks — to gauge their progress and review their goals with them to make sure his former students stay on course.

Carrot instead of stick

EPIC's "carrot instead of stick" approach has worked well, Bergstrom notes. He finds that

many students who come to EPIC have no idea how to be successful in school, and they lack the self-reflection to see the root of their issues.

For example, if they're sent to the program because of drugs, Bergstrom asks why they take them, and he often finds that the kids are stressed and use drugs as a remedy. In response, Bergstrom works on developing stress reduction techniques and self-control strategies that students can use the next time they're in a similar situation.

Although the approach seems like a dose of common sense, it can feel revolutionary to a student who has never stopped to think about their actions. By focusing on the causes of their behaviors and working to change their native responses and habits, EPIC has found few instances of repeat offenders.

"We've had very few kids come back here," says Bergstrom. "We've also had only a couple students who've dropped out from here."

As a newer part of the program, Bergstrom is working to bring in former EPIC students who have subsequently graduated from Barbers Hill ISD, so they can talk about their experiences and successes with current DAEP students who are struggling.

Bergstrom recalls a recent visit from a former DAEP student who went on to pursue a career in

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the military after graduating from high school. He shared with the DAEP kids that when he was in school, he was wrapped up in drugs. By the time he arrived at EPIC, he had low expectations for himself and didn't trust anyone. However, he said the supportive atmosphere at EPIC turned him around. He appreciated that the staff refused to give up on their students and that they always kept the environment positive and inspiring.

Seeing results

In the past five years, both the community and district staff have taken notice of Barbers Hill ISD's souped-up DAEP. Parents are recognizing that EPIC is a prime opportunity to get their children back on track. And the EPIC team often receives praise from home campus teachers on how students are returning prepared for regular classes.

"This is my 32nd year in education, and my 19th year as a principal," says Bergstrom. "And I'm excited to come in here every day. I feel like I'm making a difference."

Poole used to be a math teacher, and he recalls what it felt like to send students off for behavioral

issues, and then see them come back further behind than when they started.

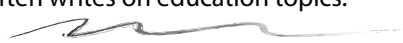
"That's a vicious cycle, and when you have that, teachers feel powerless because they almost have an incentive not to send their students to DAEP because it sometimes makes the situation worse," he says.

Bergstrom says one of the most crucial pieces of EPIC's strategy is the exit letter, in which the students set goals and articulate a vision for their academic and behavioral success. For most students, it's the first time they have envisioned a successful future for themselves — and, more importantly, have mapped out how to get there.

"We spend a lot of time on that letter, and I think it makes a big difference," he says. "I can't say that we've gotten through to everyone, but if we haven't, it's certainly not from a lack of effort here.

"This is a fabulous program, and we're all very proud to be part of it."

ELIZABETH MILLARD is a freelance journalist who often writes on education topics.





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