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Achieving Equity in District Postsecondary Planning

By: Monique Jaramillo

OneGoal's District Partnership Program partnered with Elgin School District U-46 for the 2020-21 school year to answer a single question: how can the OneGoal model, implemented by district and school leaders, influence an entire district's college and postsecondary-attainment culture? Elgin U-46's Lead Counselor Alexa Charsha and Director of Postsecondary Success Michele Chapman reflect on the challenges they worked to address as they built a districtwide vision to ensure all their graduates were prepared and supported to achieve postsecondary success.

Michele: To start, we want to give you a quick picture of who we are. We're based in Elgin, IL, which is a very large, diverse, suburban Chicago school district. We serve 37,000+ students from pre-K all the way to senior year and transition, with 61% of our students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. We have five comprehensive high schools and two alternative high schools.

Alexa: Michele and I lead the postsecondary initiative within our district and so as leaders we want to keep up with the vision that all students are supported throughout the postsecondary planning process and will graduate with viable postsecondary options.

Michele: Two years ago, we started interrogating our postsecondary practices by digging into data and we found some concerning results. For example, one in three students disagreed that teachers were helping them plan for life after graduation. One in five students disagreed that all students are encouraged to go to college. Our postsecondary enrollment numbers were not where we wanted them to be and we found inconsistencies between our schools. All of this together called for the need of a systematic approach.

Alexa: One of the most important insights we learned was that all stakeholders are really important in helping students figure out their postsecondary goals. That's teachers, administrators, and counselors. I know sometimes it sounds like 'oh, just the counselors do this work.' But when we ask students, they tell us: our teachers are super important in helping them decide what they want to do after high school.

Michele: Even as a larger school district, we didn't have resources, space, or time dedicated to postsecondary work. We started this work without a postsecondary budget, nor a district-wide dedicated college and career counselor, nor even a career center.



Michele Chapman, Director of Postsecondary Success, Elgin School District U-46



Needing a partner to work through both ongoing and COVID-related resource challenges is exactly what drew us to work with OneGoal.

Alexa Charsha

Lead Counselor, Elgin U-46

Alexa: COVID further exacerbated the challenges we were already facing. In meetings with our school leaders, we recognized how critical social-emotional support is for our adults, not just students. Needing a partner to work through both ongoing and COVID-related resource challenges is exactly what drew us to work with OneGoal.

Michele: We are partnering with OneGoal on our district approach, as well as piloting its model in one of our high schools. We meet with OneGoal quarterly to exchange data, including student feedback, so we can know exactly how they're doing. We also meet regularly with OneGoal Senior Director of Professional Learning + Coaching Andy Schmitz to talk through all of our postsecondary successes and challenges. OneGoal really provides us with that space to make more meaning out of what we're doing, exchange ideas, and collaborate to improve our postsecondary structure for all of our students.

Michele: We've had our challenges, even without COVID. Time is always a barrier. Next is knowledge. In beginning our postsecondary work, we found that we really had to build our adults' knowledge base. Everyone had to have an understanding of what postsecondary was (after all, a teacher's college experience is just their own and might not match that of their students') and the different options and opportunities available, whether college, career, military or trade. We've had to work hard to fill that gap, address mindsets and earn buy-in. We've had to break out of set ways when it comes to who does what and what kids "should" do for postsecondary. We've had to work through those ideas and implicit biases and we're still working on it, there's still a lot of room to grow.

Alexa: To work through the challenges, we emphasized greater collaboration at every level, the need to be flexible and learn from one another, as well as building consistency throughout our schools, even in the midst of the COVID-related obstacles. We meet with the school leaders to align on postsecondary goals, our visions and beliefs, as well as provide feedback and help schools troubleshoot what they're going to do next with their teams. We also partnered with community colleges to offer our students dual credit opportunities within the high school, which has both academic and economic benefits for students.

Alexa: We're at the close of our first year into our partnership with OneGoal but we're already starting to see some positive outcomes. First, a growth in the general awareness and shared ownership of our work across schools and plans for improving our postsecondary supports. We're starting to see more of a shared language from our campuses, what they hope for students, and what they know is going to be next for students. Second, we've begun working with our curriculum leads to integrate more of this work into the classroom experience, which is a big win because then all students are getting that postsecondary information. Finally, before this initiative, we didn't really look at data. Now if you ask anybody on our postsecondary teams, they can tell you how many students have completed their FAFSA applications or what percentage of their students have enrolled in college. Just that general knowledge of where our

students are going and where we would like them to go. This data now directly informs our strategy.



Elgin U-46's Lead Counselor Alexa Charsha

Michele: It's exciting because with OneGoal being a three-year program, and us continuing the pilot, next year we'll have both a senior class and junior class engaging with this course. We started with students wondering, 'What happens when I become a senior?' Today we're seeing students be able to declare 'I plan to do X next year,' whether that's college or maybe something else. They can articulate their goals, they're thinking of them ahead of time, and they know we're there to support them achieve their dreams.