



*Eleanor Culloton*

# RAISING THE BARR

## St. Louis Park program boosts achievement, graduation rates — and relationships

*By Robert Metz*

In the 1970s and 1980s, St. Louis Park — located on the western edge of Minneapolis — was a thriving, fast-growing community. The St. Louis Park School District was one of the largest school districts in Minnesota, graduating more than 800 students per year. Nearly all of the students were white and the economics of the area were strong.

Then, the community and school district began to age, and St. Louis Park began to transition into an inner-ring suburb. Enrollment began to drop and many schools were closed. By the late 1990s, it was not unusual for 40 percent of the ninth-grade students to fail at least one class, and the graduation rate was dropping. By the early

2000s, the senior class was approximately 280 students and the student demographics had shifted to approximately 60 percent white, 30 percent black and 10 percent Hispanic.

Angela Jerabek, the ninth-grade counselor at the time, applied for a small state grant to implement a homegrown ninth-grade program. Jerabek believed that decreasing the ninth-grade failure rate would lead to an increase in the graduation rate, an improved school climate, and a reduction in student at-risk behaviors.

St. Louis Park's ninth-grade program did not require a change in administration or to the teachers in the school. The program did not



*St. Louis Park Superintendent Robert Metz credits the Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) program for reducing the ninth-grade failure rate — and increasing graduation rates — for black and Hispanic students.*

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*Kendra Marchart*

change the students, the curriculum, or the facility. The program did not create a magnet program or a charter school. What the program did do was develop the ability of teachers to create intentional relationships with students and then to use those relationships to remove nonacademic barriers to learning. Most people are surprised to learn that students typically do not fail a high school class because they are not smart enough. At St. Louis Park High School, we have many different levels of courses and can almost always place a student in a course that matches his or her academic level. Most students fail a class because of nonacademic barriers.

After many years of development, the model is now known as Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR). There are eight main components to BARR. Each, on its own, is not radical, but together they produce outstanding results. For example, in a BARR school, teams of teachers meet regularly to get to know their students extremely well. They track student progress, and design and deliver interventions for the students they share. In addition, students participate in a social-emotional learning activity, called I-Time, on a weekly basis. These activities build trust and collegiality among the students and between the students and the teachers.

Today approximately 85 percent of St. Louis Park ninth-graders pass all of their classes, which in turn led to a four-year graduation rate of 93

percent in 2015. In addition, by building relationships with our black and Hispanic students and leveraging those relationships to reduce their ninth-grade failure rate, graduation rates for black and Hispanic students have increased dramatically. In 2015, 91.4 percent of black students and 95 percent of Hispanic students graduated in four years, compared to 62 percent of black students and 65.6 percent of Hispanic students statewide. Besides the improved student results, there are many other benefits to BARR.

We have experienced a tremendous shift in our ninth-grade class culture. Relationships are especially important for students who otherwise might not bond to school, or for students who may be facing personal struggles. Once students form a personal bond with someone at school, they begin to care about what happens in school. Once they begin to care about what happens in school, their success almost always improves.

BARR has also served as a very effective teacher development model. As teachers work in teams to problem-solve around individual students, the competitive and creative part of teaching is reignited. Experienced teachers mentor younger teachers, and younger teachers share new ideas with experienced teachers. When teacher teams see that they are really making a difference, that in and of itself becomes highly motivating. Today, many of our most experienced and well-respected teachers request to teach ninth grade.

It should be noted that we have been able to make and sustain these dramatic improvements with very little annual expense. In fact, we have actually saved money. Before implementing BARR, many students failed classes, requiring us to reteach sections of courses for students who needed to retake a course to earn credit. In addition, many of our students who were behind in their credits left our school to make up classes in nearby alternative schools, taking their state aid with them. With BARR, far fewer students fail a course, so the need to fund additional credit-recovery courses has lessened greatly, and the number of students who leave to attend alternative schools has slowed to a trickle.

BARR was awarded a federal Investment in Innovation (i3) Development Grant in 2010 and an i3 Validation Grant in 2013. BARR is now being used by dozens of schools across the country. I am convinced that BARR will work anywhere. BARR will work in big schools and small schools, rural schools and urban schools, private schools and public schools. I strongly encourage you to consider using this model in your school district.

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