

Back from the brink

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SOUTH PORTLAND – Less than a week from graduation, a handful of seniors at South Portland High School are praising a new program launched this year as the reason they will march to “Pomp and Circumstance” on Sunday alongside their classmates.

Since October, a core group of six to eight students, and sometimes as many as 13, have met every Tuesday after school in the high school library to get extra help at classes in which they’re struggling, or to fit in the extra classes they somehow missed or failed along the way. The goal: The magic number of 24 credits needed to earn a diploma.

In most cases, program advisers say, the students don’t necessarily struggle to understand their classwork, just the motivation and proper environment in which to complete it.

“I can do work easily, but finishing work – not really my thing,” said Jessica Claudio, who plans to study criminal justice at Southern Maine Community College now that a high school diploma seems assured.

“Being in a quiet environment where I can get help from teachers definitely helped me get work in more efficiently,” she said. “If I hadn’t got the help I did, I don’t think I would have picked up and finished the extra class I needed.”

“These are the fence sitters,” said South Portland’s school completion coordinator, David Brenner, who founded the new study group with first-year Vice Principal Kimberlee Bennett.

“We know that students leave school at 1:50 with good intentions of doing homework but then life happens and they get caught on that cycle of being behind, trying to catch up while also dealing with current work,” said Brenner. “So, we asked, what is going to get these students to come in after school?”

“We got pizza!” said Bennett, with a laugh.

A \$300 grant from the Rotary Club of South Portland-Cape Elizabeth helped supply pizza to students willing to put in the extra time. Meanwhile, the heart of the program, dubbed Hassle to Tassel, has been a mannequin bust donated by the South Portland Men’s Warehouse. Outfitted with a cap and gown, the mannequin has served as inspiration, to remind participating students that, while the extra hours they are putting in may seem like a hassle, hard work is the only path to the tassel that marks the transition from teen to young adult.

“The kids have all tried on the gown at various times, or sat doing their work while wearing the cap,” said Bennett.

“It’s corny, but sometimes corny works,” said Brenner, adding with a laugh, “Although, to be honest I think the pizza works better.”

“High school is tough,” said Bennett. “For a lot of kids it works, but we are constantly striving to find ways to offer it to the kids that it doesn’t work for. Rather than try and squeeze them into what we think school should be, we are trying to adjust how we offer school to engage the disengaged.

“I think right now kids are so over stimulated with social media and other stuff that they are into the instant gratification thing,” said Bennett. “I think that long-term planning thing is getting harder for them.”

That, said Tabatha Moore, is what nearly did her in.

“At home, you’re so tempted to go on Facebook and everything, whereas here it’s easier to just focus on your work,” she said. “Even in a class, with 20 kids, it’s really hard for me to focus. Here there are fewer kids and we’re all here for the same reason, so that helps.”

However, Hassle to Tassel students say, the real benefit of the program – what truly enables them to succeed more than a quiet place to study – is the relationships they’ve built during the year with adults like Brenner and Bennett and the various teachers who have volunteered to help out.

Apart from being an admitted procrastinator, Luis Calderon started his senior year with “big medical issues” that got him behind.

“After that, it was like, OK, I’m just showing up, doing whatever,” he said. “But this definitely, really showed me that somebody actually cared and that was the biggest thing.

“There’s no doubt in my mind I wouldn’t have graduated without this. I feel like without of this program I would not have caught up with the work I did,” said Calderon, adding that it’s unlikely he would have attempted a fifth year.

“I think having felt like I failed I would have just gone out to get a job somewhere or try to, and maybe moved in with friends, thinking for the rest of my life that school was something that just wasn’t for me.”

That, said Bennett, is a common feeling for students who get to high school not quite ready for its demands and quickly fall behind and eventually give up.

According to the Maine Department of Education, South Portland High School lost 27 of its 867 students last year, for a dropout rate of 3.11 percent. Of the students who entered South Portland as freshman in 2008, 82.7 percent graduated on time last June.

“They don’t drop out as freshmen,” said Bennett. “They don’t drop out as sophomores. It’s when they’re 17 or 18 and get to the point when they can’t graduate. They get discouraged and that’s when we lose them.”

“I remember my freshman year I really struggled,” said Moore. “I failed two classes and that’s what I’m making up for this year. As a freshman I treated it all like a joke and didn’t realize how serious it was because I was so used to middle school and thinking that, Oh, if I fail they’ll just keep me going on. Then I got to high school and they are like, no, you have to do this work.

“I was all stressed out, I was doing everything I thought I could do, but testing was just so hard for me,” said Moore. “Then I got to this year and I was just petrified, thinking I wasn’t going to graduate. I feel so much better now. I don’t know what the word is other than to say I’m just so excited.”

Both Moore and Calderon say the Hassle to Tassel program should continue past its pilot year and should be opened up to underclassmen to get them on track before they reach the “panic mode” of senior year, or go through what some of their peers had to a few weeks back when the road to a tassel became a double hassle as the program began running twice per week.

Like Claudio, Moore and Calderon are bound for SMCC, the former for a business degree, and the latter for criminal justice. Both say they expect the lessons they learned in Hassle to Tassel to play an important part in their looming collegiate careers.

“The fact that Ms. Bennett pushed me to do my work really spilled over into my home life and think it will help me in the future,” said Calderon.

“What I’ve learned is that if you want to go far, it’s all about pursuing it and not just dreaming about it,” said Moore.