

# ***Engagement for Success:***

## **Innovative *12 for Life* Program Changes Dropout Statistics in Carroll County**

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### **Overview**

#### ***Innovation/Solution/Practice at a Glance***

Improving graduation rate is not just the responsibility of the school system—it is also a community responsibility. Carroll County Schools and the Southwire Company have exemplified this concept with the establishment of an alternative route to a high school diploma. Since 2003, Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) has trained five cohorts from Carroll County Schools. GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit™ leadership development program focuses on the national and state dropout rates, and cohort groups spend time analyzing causes and planning for improvement around the theme of increasing graduation rates. The focus on improving graduation rate in Carroll County became a reality with the establishment of the **12 for Life** program. The program combines traditional classroom instruction with jobs inside real manufacturing plants. The students benefit by working regular hours for actual wages while concurrently gaining high school credits toward a diploma.

#### ***Impact at a Glance***

Through the partnership between Carroll County Schools and the Southwire Company over the last three years, 93 students – all potential dropouts – have stayed in school, earned a high school diploma, and gained real world work experience. The **12 for Life** program provides students, the school system, and the community with a unique opportunity to instill in students the belief that if they complete a full 12 years of education, they will have better lives.

### **The Impact Story**

#### ***Background/Context***

Carroll County Schools is located on the Alabama line about 60 miles west of Atlanta and is the 23<sup>rd</sup> largest school system in Georgia, with 15,000 students. The district currently has 22 schools, but with an average growth rate of five percent, the number of schools is increasing steadily. In 2009 the district had a student population that was 58% economically-disadvantaged.

In 2004, the graduation rate in Carroll County was 66.2%, just slightly higher than the state's rate of 65.4%. Adults ages 25 to 34 who drop out of school or do not acquire a GED earn up to 30% less than their peers who do complete high school or earn their GED (Education Trust, June 2005). This research identifies an economic problem associated with drop-outs, but there is also the issue of finding high quality workers for business and industry in a community with a high drop-out rate. The growing dropout problem isn't just a matter of statistics. It's a real issue that hits close to home, with negative consequences that can ripple throughout the entire community in devastating ways:

## ***What Was Done?***

The high school dropout rate and low graduation rates are a recognized problem in our nation and state. The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) has utilized the Alliance of Education Agency Heads (AEAH) Goal #1 of increasing graduation rate, decreasing drop-out rate, and increasing post-secondary enrollment as the primary focus of Base Camp and Leadership Summit™ training for many years. Carroll County Schools sent their first cohort to GLISI in 2003-2004 and has had four additional cohort groups attend since that time. The GLISI training helped Carroll County Schools to focus on graduation and drop-out statistics for their district.

At the same time, Southwire Company, a wire and cable manufacturer based in Carrollton, Georgia, was troubled by the county's drop-out statistics and the resulting lack of high quality workers. They began working with Carroll County Schools to try to develop a solution for this problem, as both organizations shared concerns about the future of their community.

Based on the GLISI training, Carroll County Schools worked to identify the root causes of the drop-out problem in their district using data analysis tools. In addition, the GLISI training provided an avenue for this problem to be addressed and helped the district focus on the drop-out rate. The partnership between Carroll County Schools and Southwire was an important step to helping Carroll County Schools combat the issue in a manner that would really address the main reasons they discovered in their area for students dropping out of schools. Using their data and available research, Carroll County Schools embraced an out-of-the-box solution for their community. They also fully recognized the importance of involving external stakeholders as this program would not have been possible without a local business like Southwire volunteering to support students, their future employees. Just as the district teams had also learned at GLISI, stakeholder engagement in this case was the true key to creating a solution that met the real causes of the problem.

The partnership between Southwire and Carroll County Schools started in 2004 with discussions about an alternative diploma option that would allow at-risk high school students to receive credit for working, while they also stayed in school. The plan for this alternative diploma option needed to provide opportunities for students that addressed the three primary reasons students do not stay in school (identified from Carroll County's data analysis work): poverty, low academic performance, and a lack of support. According to research, students who come from a low-income family often feel the need to contribute financially to the family or to their own independence, and will prematurely leave school to get a job. Students falling behind academically are also at high risk of failing to finish high school with a diploma. The third factor affecting high school completion is a lack of a support system for the student. Students that are not academically successful or lack support often have low self-esteem and little motivation to complete high school and earn a diploma. Research also indicates that the high school dropout rate is a preventable problem, if strategies to address the three key reasons for dropping out are provided. With this in mind, both sides worked together to develop a plan for at-risk students to earn money by working at a Southwire facility, earn credits toward a high school diploma, and be assigned a mentor for support during the process. The joint plan between Southwire and Carroll County Schools resulted in the **12 for Life** program.

After starting initial discussions in 2004 and many months of planning and analyzing data, the **12 for Life** facility built by Southwire opened in 2007. The facility included a real manufacturing plant along with key elements of a traditional school such as classrooms and computer labs. This unique partnership between Southwire and the Carroll County School System gives students the best of both worlds: they work regular hours; they earn actual wages; and they learn skills they will need after they graduate. Most importantly, they stay in school.

To be eligible for **12 for Life**, a student must be 16 years old, pass a drug screening, and be identified by Carroll County staff (graduation coaches, counselors, or program administrators) as needing additional support to complete high school. Students complete job applications and job interviews prior to being admitted into the program. All the normal expectations of employment apply to the **12 for Life** students. They must have good attendance, be on time, complete the assigned work, and be a productive worker. Students that do not meet these expectations are removed from the program and go back to their traditional high schools.

Students attend class in a traditional setting at their assigned high school for part of the day, and work a four hour manufacturing shift in the **12 for Life** plant for the remainder of their day. The **12 for Life** plant works on three daily, four-hour shifts, which are supervised by Southwire personnel. Southwire employees share their time and experience through a mentoring program that provides one-on-one support. Students are rotated from workstation to workstation, so they gain experience throughout the manufacturing process. They learn a variety of job skills including machine operation, logistics, product and reel assembly, shipping, quality assurance and data entry. Bus transportation is available for those who need it, at a minimal round-trip fee. While employed in the 12 for Life program, students are expected to work one Saturday each month as well as over the summer. Upon successful completion of **12 for Life** and earning a high school diploma, a student will be placed on a preferred hiring list for Southwire Company.

At **12 for Life**, students benefit from a combination of classroom instruction and on-the-job training, which together build the work skills that employers demand and the life skills that students will need to be successful after graduation. Additional instruction and tutoring also takes place at the **12 for Life** facility. The foundation of **12 for Life's** educational component is typical of Georgia's cooperative education work-based learning programs. Carroll County based the program's curriculum on the diversified cooperative training model, which is the approved work-based learning program for students enrolled in trade and industrial education programs. The program administrators work with each individual student to customize an education, training, and work plan, built around each student's unique challenges and needs, to help that student graduate on time and with a high school diploma. Modeled after the youth apprenticeship program, students have the opportunity to earn 2 credits per semester while enrolled in the **12 for Life** program. Students receive school credits for both the classroom and work components of the program. The **12 for Life** curriculum uses traditional textbooks for a work-based learning class, as well as a work ethics program designed by the Technical College System of Georgia. It also employs WorkKeys, a job skills assessment system that measures real-world skills employers believe are critical to job success. Guest speakers and tours of various Southwire facilities give students an even broader grasp of the range of jobs available and a personal glimpse of what those jobs entail. Many U.S.

employers have complained that it is increasingly difficult to find job applicants with strong work ethics. Because they are actual Southwire employees, **12 for Life** students learn the importance of promptness, hard work and dedication to the job. When they later apply for a permanent job at Southwire or elsewhere, their **12 for Life** record is proof of their work ethic and their commitment to education and a better life.

### ***What were the Results?***

The **12 for Life** program is actively reversing the dropout trend in Carroll County Schools. With 93 students graduating in the first three years, the program is on track to meet its goal of 175 High School Graduates by 2012. During the first year of the **12 for Life** program, 12 students graduated with high school diplomas. Since then, 27 went on to graduate in 2008, and 54 graduated in 2009. Over the same time period, graduation rates across the district have also increased. In 2007, 65.5 percent of the students in the district graduated; that number increased to 69.4 percent in 2008 and to 77.2 percent in 2009. More students in Carroll County are staying in school, and the **12 for Life** students are also earning money and learning the skills employers seek.

While performing manufacturing and support tasks, **12 for Life** students learn other crucial workplace skills:

- Shipping
- Quality Assurance
- Data Entry
- Record-keeping
- Leadership
- Responsibility
- Teamwork
- Communication

Students also gain valuable insights into career and life skills to help them navigate life post-graduation. Through on-site workshops, one-on-one mentoring, and instruction, **12 for Life** students learn about:

- Career opportunities at Southwire through tours of other Southwire plants
- Interviewing skills
- Resume building
- Job searching
- Other life skills

### ***What was the Impact?***

One of the things Carroll County learned through the **12 for Life** program is the need to be dynamic to meet the emerging needs of the students— wherever the student may be. For example, when some of the students earned their first paycheck, they were startled to learn they wouldn't actually take home all they'd earned— they had never learned about income taxes. Seeing an opportunity for the students to gain additional life skills, Southwire coordinated a seminar with a local bank, which helped the students understand what everything on their pay-stubs meant, from taxes and FICA

deductions to sick and vacation leave. Proof that the student-focused approach is working: in 2008, 15 percent of students filed taxes for themselves!

While Carroll County can measure the results in numbers, they can also acknowledge the graduates' achievements and judge the success of the program in other ways. Many students acknowledge they have matured and have experienced positive growth while participating in the **12 for Life** program. Some have set – and achieved – life goals for the first time, as a direct result of the self-confidence, skills, and training they gained in the program. As one student stated in a scholarship application for college,

***12 for Life** has made a great impact on my life. Before I came to **12 for Life** I needed money to help support myself and credits to graduate. My family and I were struggling due to my mother's sickness...I could never explain perfectly to anyone how great this program has helped me..."*

Many students in the **12 for Life** program are choosing to continue their education at a technical college or university – something that, for most, was not even a consideration before they started the program.

The benefits of this program range from the impact on the individual student, to their family, to the school system, to the community. Through the **12 for Life** program, Carroll County Schools has learned how to dynamically meet student needs with non-traditional options and found a way to reach students that many people felt were destined to drop-out. Another benefit has been the strong partnership developed between Carroll County Schools and Southwire. The **12 for Life** program would not have been possible financially without Southwire, but the collaboration and commitment from both the school district and Southwire were necessary for program success.

### **Next Steps**

Carroll County Schools is fully committed to the **12 for Life** Program and their partnership with Southwire. Both the school district and Southwire see the individual and collective benefit from the **12 for Life** program. Southwire has expanded the **12 for Life** concept to their Florence, Alabama facility, and has offered neighboring Heard County the option to have their students join the Carroll County partnership.

Carroll County is leveraging their success in providing alternative routes to graduation by partnering with another community stakeholder, West Georgia Technical College. Over the last couple of years, Carroll County and West Georgia Technical College have submitted a charter for the establishment of College and Career Academies. The charter led the way to a grant that the district received for \$3.1 million to build the academies at the Technical Education Center. Through this initiative, students will be able to obtain college credit from West Georgia Technical College while in high school. Teachers from the Technical Education Center and from West Georgia Technical College will begin to work “across the courses” in both facilities to help with the transition of students to post-secondary technical college. This endeavor demonstrates additional with the community, and offers students another alternative to the traditional classroom. Like the Southwire partnership, this program promises to keep students in school and help them graduate, while also benefiting the community as a whole.

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