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'Recovery' forum showcases successes of former dropouts who later finished school

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Carmel Lujan didn't graduate from Midland High School on time and had to come back for another semester. A desire to move on to "bigger and better things" and a nudge from his collegiate coach, Ramona Perales, and Lujan was on his way.

He earned credits he missed through the online recovery program A Plus and now is attending Midland College.

Lujan was one of three students and the same number of collegiate coaches who gave testimonials and answered questions Thursday during a Recovery Community Forum held at Casa de Amigos.

Midland Independent School District Dropout Prevention/At-Risk Coordinator Deborah Acosta moderated the event, which was attended by a handful of people, including several Midland ISD officials. Its purpose was to let the community know what the district is doing to help "combat our dropout crisis."

The National Education Center, which follows a class through four years of high school, shows MISD's dropout rate is 31 percent.

Part of what Lujan said turned him around was Perales talking to him daily.

"It helps a lot when you have to watch your class walk the stage (at graduation) without you. Skipping (class) is bad, bad, bad," he said.

Mirtha Estrada was in her fifth year as a senior. She had 13 credits and has now accumulated 22 through the A Plus program. "I recovered in a semester what I didn't do in a year. I'm glad Miss (Terri) Coleman (the Lee High School collegiate coach) gave me a chance to work in the A Plus lab," Estrada said.

Acosta has been in her job since August. One of the first things she participated in was a recovery walk to find students who had not re-enrolled at school. Officials were able to find 547 students, and of those, 223 returned to school, she said. She said officials found many students who withdrew from school had family obligations or didn't know they could come back.

She noted the more education you get, the more money you will earn, so you can better provide for your family.

Along with the A Plus program, the district has flexible day schedules now, which allow students to come in during the evening and on Saturdays, and MISD is adding a larger selection of career and technology classes, Acosta said. "That's a big key to bringing them in," she said, adding she predicts a large increase in graduation rate.

Collegiate coaches are located at the two freshman schools, two senior high schools and a liaison at Coleman High School. They are supposed to keep students on track with their studies and make sure they attend class. They focus on at-risk factors such as school attendance, discipline, failing TAKS and/or failing classes.

Perales and Coleman on Thursday were joined by Heather Mason, collegiate coach at Midland Freshman High School. Patricia Flores, the coach at Lee Freshman, was in Houston gathering ideas on dropout prevention from that district and could not attend the forum.

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