Addressing
School Dropout in Texas

A Summary for Administrators and Policymakers
of
Dropout Prevention: A Practice Guide
(U.S. Department of Education,
Institute of Education Sciences, 2008)

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Over half a million students in the U. S. leave high school each year. Dropout rates have remained about the same for the last 30 years even though spending on education has risen substantially during that time.[1]

To guide educators, administrators and policymakers on how to address the immense challenge of reducing dropout rates, the U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences gathered nationally recognized researchers to identify dropout prevention interventions that have a proven record of keeping students in school. The evidence for success considered by this panel of experts included experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations meeting the standards of the department's What Works Clearinghouse (http://www.whatworks.ed.gov) and authoritative analyses of dropout prevention practices. From this identification of successful intervention programs and strategies came six evidence-based recommendations for educators, administrators, and policymakers. These recommendations, which address diagnostic processes for identifying potential dropouts, targeted interventions for at-risk students, and school-wide reforms designed to enhance engagement, can lead to fewer dropouts and improved high school graduation rates if implemented effectively.

The panel noted that early interventions in *preschool and elementary grades* can mitigate many of the academic, social, and behavioral factors that lead to students dropping out of school. However, the panel's task was to focus on strategies that can be implemented at the *middle and high school levels* to raise students' motivation to stay in school.

Increasing student engagement was viewed by the experts as a critical factor in preventing dropping out. Signs of student engagement in school are good attendance, class participation, effort in doing schoolwork, a lack of disciplinary infractions, and a sense of belonging and identification with the school. The development of academic skills beginning in the elementary grades impacts whether students remain engaged through middle and high school. Secondary students whose academic skills lag can exhibit signs of disengagement and often need intensive individual support to re-engage in school.

The panel's six recommendations were derived from a process of examining research studies that evaluated the impacts of dropout prevention programs, identifying key parts of individual interventions, and determining the level of evidence supporting positive outcomes for the interventions. Levels of evidence, which follow the Institute of Education Sciences guidelines, were assigned to each recommendation.

Levels of Evidence

- **Strong** – consistent and generalizable evidence that a dropout prevention program causes better outcomes.

- **Moderate** – evidence from studies that allows strong causal conclusions but cannot be generalized with assurance to the focused population, perhaps because the findings have not been widely replicated, or evidence that can be generalized but has more causal ambiguity than offered by experimental designs.

- **Low** – expert opinion based on reasonable extrapolations from research and theory on other topics and evidence from studies that don't meet the standards for moderate or strong evidence.

Two of the six recommendations received a low evidence rating while the level of evidence for the other four recommendations was moderate. For example, Recommendation 1, which proposes utilizing diagnostic data systems to identify students at risk of dropping out, has a low evidence rating. This recommendation is rated low because there are few existing studies that validly test the connection between the use of diagnostic data systems and dropout prevention. However, the expert opinion of the panel was that using data to identify at-risk students is a critical component of a multi-faceted dropout prevention program.

The panel concluded that schools will have the greatest success in reducing dropout rates if all or the majority of these recommendations are implemented. Adopting individual recommendations may improve graduation rates slightly, but a comprehensive approach has the greatest potential for success.

Recommendations

1. Utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out.

2. Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.

3. Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.

4. Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills.

5. Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.

6. Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school.

◇ RECOMMENDATION 1

Utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out.

Level of Evidence:

Low

Evidence to Support Recommendation:

Multiple research studies show that student absences, grade retention, low academic achievement, low socio-economic status, and behavioral problems are indicators for dropping out of school.[2] Using student-level databases allows schools to more accurately identify students who are at risk of dropping out and to identify them earlier. In addition, an initial diagnostic assessment of the prevalence of these risk indicators can help administrators determine whether a school-wide problem exists that merits comprehensive reforms in addition to targeted interventions.

How to Implement This Recommendation:

Districts and schools should use student data to tell them what the scope of the dropout problem is, which students are at high risk of dropping out, why individual students drop out, and when students are most likely to drop out. Schools should designate a particular staff member or a team of individuals, such as attendance staff and counselors, to regularly monitor data.

Specifically, schools should:

- Use longitudinal, student-level data to accurately calculate dropout and graduation rates using methods adopted by the National Governor's Association (NGA, 2005) and endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education (2008).
- Use data to identify new and transitioning students, particularly those transitioning from middle to high school, with histories of at-risk behaviors.
- Monitor student academic and social performance continually and use automated alerts to call attention to changes in at-risk behaviors.
- Monitor students' sense of engagement and belonging in school by periodically surveying students or conducting small group interviews about their perceptions of the school climate.
- Document accurately information on student withdrawals.

◇ RECOMMENDATION 2
Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.

Level of Evidence:
Moderate

Evidence to Support Recommendation:
Research suggests that students who have ongoing relationships with adults are more involved in school; have reduced behavioral problems; and have better attendance, grades, and communication and social skills.[3] The panel reviewed five rigorously evaluated studies of four dropout intervention programs that used adult advocates to work with at-risk students to provide them with academic and behavioral support. Of the three interventions in which adult advocates were the primary focus, two showed promising results in improving student engagement in school.

How to Implement This Recommendation:
Adult advocates can be designated to work one-on-one with students at high risk of dropping out of school. An advocate, who could be a resource teacher, community member, or social worker, would meet with the student frequently, guide him or her on school and non-school matters, model positive behavior and decision-making skills, and be an encouraging and trusted adult in the student's life.

Specifically, schools should:

- Choose adults to be advocates who are committed and knowledgeable about helping at-risk students.
- Keep advocate caseloads to no more than 15 students, and thoughtfully match students and advocates to increase the likelihood that a trusting relationship will develop.
- Create regular times each day or week for students and advocates to meet.
- Provide advocates with guidance and training on how to work with students, parents and teachers to address problems in the students' lives.

◇ RECOMMENDATION 3

Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.

Level of Evidence:

Moderate

Evidence to Support Recommendation:

Research shows that low academic performance in school can lead to dropping out and that academic supports, such as tutoring and enrichment programs, can bridge the skills gap and re-engage students in school.[4] Twelve rigorous studies of dropout intervention programs, which included a strong academic support component, were reviewed by the panel and all but two showed positive effects on progressing in school.

How to Implement This Recommendation:

Dropout prevention programs that include an academic support component generally offer more intensive academic programs and/or tutoring and homework assistance.

Specifically, schools should:

- Provide enrichment courses targeting specific subject areas such as reading, writing, or math.
- Conduct targeted enrichment during advisory periods, lunch, or study skills periods that are built into the daily schedule.
- Offer individual or small group support in test-taking and study skills.
- Create opportunities for extra study time and credit recovery and acceleration through after school, Saturday school, or summer programs.

◇ RECOMMENDATION 4

Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills.

Level of Evidence:

Low

Evidence to Support Recommendation:

Students who engage in disruptive school behavior are more likely to drop out of school. Some dropout prevention efforts attempt to improve classroom behavior by teaching problem-solving and life skills that lead to enhanced relationships with staff and peers and, as a result, a greater sense of school connection.[5] Six studies of five programs that included a component to improve students' behavioral and social skills were evaluated by the panel. Students who participated in interventions that used one-on-one or small group interactions to discuss problem-solving strategies, controlling anger, and avoidance of risky behaviors and included curricula designed to improve students' classroom behavior and social relations were less likely to drop out.

How to Implement This Recommendation:

Schools can use adult advocates (see Recommendation 2) to work with students individually or in small groups to equip them with positive behavioral and social skills.

Specifically, schools should:

- Have adult advocates or other engaged adults work with students to establish academic and behavioral goals with specific benchmarks.
- Provide positive rewards and recognition for at-risk students' accomplishments.
- Integrate the teaching of problem-solving and decision-making skills in existing curricula or offer a life-skills course for targeted students.
- Address the underlying, external factors that cause student behavioral problems by partnering with community-based providers in social services, welfare, mental health, and law enforcement.

◇ RECOMMENDATION 5
Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.

Level of Evidence:

Moderate

Evidence to Support Recommendation:

The large size of schools, particularly high schools, can cause students to feel alienated and detached to the point of dropping out. School-wide reforms that create smaller school environments and more personalized attention have been found to foster higher student achievement, school attendance, and graduation rates.[6] The panel considered seven studies of five interventions that personalized the learning environment for students. While positive effects were documented in the evaluations, the interventions, such as creating a ninth grade center or a school-within-a-school, varied greatly.

How to Implement This Recommendation:

Part of this panel recommendation calls for total reform of large high schools to create more personalized learning communities for students. Schools not wanting to reorganize their overall structure can choose to implement targeted strategies for personalizing the school environment.

Specifically, schools should:

- Establish small learning communities that may emphasize a specific curricular focus or career path.
- Employ team teaching so that students have access to more individualized attention and teachers have professional support while working with difficult students.

- Create smaller classes to allow students to receive more individualized instruction and interact more frequently with teachers.
- Implement schedule changes that lengthen classroom time, such as block scheduling, extended class periods, or advisory and study periods.
- Encourage student participation in extracurricular activities.

◇ RECOMMENDATION 6

Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school.

Level of Evidence:

Moderate

Evidence to Support Recommendation:

Current national education reform efforts emphasize the need to increase high school academic content to better prepare students for postsecondary opportunities—either college or the workforce. Most reforms to improve the rigor and relevance of classroom instruction emphasize professional development for teachers. In addition, high school career and technology programs have been remodeled to give students "multiple pathways" to graduation, such as college preparatory classes, professional or technical courses that offer academic and real work application, and field-based learning, as a way to keep students engaged in school.[7] Eight studies of seven dropout programs that used career-related curricula in conjunction with a rigorous academic program of study along with career advising showed positive results in keeping students in school. One thoroughly evaluated intervention that provided on-site coaching for teachers to improve classroom instruction was found to have measurable results in reducing the number of dropouts.

How to Implement This Recommendation:

The strategies in this recommendation focus on increasing the rigor of high school instruction while making the content more relevant for students who may not see the relationship between career interests and what they are learning.

Specifically, schools should:

- Offer teachers ongoing opportunities to expand their knowledge and improve skills with professional development workshops, on-site coaching, and professional learning communities where they have time to collaborate with mentor teachers on curriculum development and classroom teaching strategies.
- Integrate academic content with career and skills-based themes through career academies, such as health, business or the arts, or multiple pathways models.

- Host career days and offer visits to postsecondary campuses.
- Provide students with a thorough understanding of high school course requirements for specific college programs and assist students in navigating the college application and financial aid process.
- Partner with local businesses to provide students with internships, employment, and simulated job interviews.

Conclusion

These recommendations for educators, administrators and policymakers have an evidence-based record of improving the retention of students. Any school's dropout intervention effort should begin with a thorough assessment of student data which should drive the design of a comprehensive program that includes both targeted and school-wide strategies. The data should continue to be examined over time so that any necessary adjustments can be made in the implementation of the recommendations. While schools can't address all the issues that cause students to drop out of school, the panel believes that the practices in these recommendations will allow educators to be successful in curbing alarmingly-high dropout rates in the U.S.

Endnotes

[1]Heckman & LaFontaine (2007); Warren & Halpern-Manners (2007).

[2]Battin-Pearson et al. (2000); Barrington & Hendricks (1989); Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs (1997); Ensminger & Slusarick (1992); Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple (2002): Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey (1997); Finn & Rock (1997); Morris, Ehren, & Lenz (1991); Rumberger (1995); Allensworth & Easton (2005); Goldschmidt & Wang (1999); Rumberger & Larson (1998); Ekstrom et al. (1986); Phelan (1992); Rumberger (1987); Suh, Suh, & Houston (in press).

[3]Wehlage (1989); Wehlage et al. (1989); Pringle et al. (1993); Cragar (1994); Sipe (1996); McPartland & Nettles (1991); Grossman & Garry (1997).

[4]Lee & Burkam (2003); Rumberger (1995); Rumberger & Thomas (2000); Rumberger & Palardy (2005); Rumberger & Larson (1998); Balfanz, McPartland, & Shaw (2002).

[5]Rumberger (1995); Rumberger & Palardy (2005); Rumberger & Larson (1998); Swanson & Schneider (1999); Goldschmidt & Wang (1999).

[6]Wehlage et al. (1989); National Research Council (2004); Lee & Smith (1995); Wasley et al. (2000); McMullan, Sipe, & Wolf (1994); Quint (2006).

[7] Quint et al. (2005); Kemple & Snipes (2000); Kemple (2004); Kemple et al. (2005).

Note: For a complete list of references, please see the actual practice guide: *Dropout Prevention: A Practice Guide*, available on the Institute of Education Sciences web site at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc.