

Engaging Students in School and Learning: Policy Considerations for Improving the Graduation Rate in Minnesota



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Introduction

The current emphasis on narrowing the achievement gaps and increasing global competitiveness has sharpened the national, state, and local focus on the school dropout problem. An established body of research links failure to graduate to increases in crime and poverty and decreases in earning potential, quality of life, and physical and mental health. Recent federal and state efforts to quantify graduation rates accurately and uniformly have highlighted the magnitude of the dropout crisis.

States, districts, and communities are working to address the dropout problem by evaluating their own policies, coordinating existing resources, and investigating what is working in their own region and nationwide. Minnesota is no exception in the existence of a dropout problem or in the intent to address it effectively. Minnesota's education stakeholders are actively looking for ways to increase the graduation rate and put more students on the path to high school completion, postsecondary education, and workforce competitiveness.

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the dropout issue nationally and in Minnesota. Current efforts and research on effective strategies are highlighted to help inform policymakers in education and the broader community who are working to address the dropout issue in Minnesota.

Defining the Dropout Issue in Minnesota

WHO IS CONSIDERED A DROPOUT UNDER MINNESOTA LAW?

In Minnesota, every child between the ages of 7 and 16 must receive instruction, as specified by Minnesota Statute 120A.22. Parents or guardians may request permission for a child of compulsory school age to be exempt from schooling for a period of time due to reasons such as mental or physical conditions that prevent attendance, duty in any U.S. military branch, family emergencies, or prior completion of state and district standards for graduation. Students between the ages of 16 and 18 who wish to withdraw

from school may do so with permission from their parent or guardian, provided that (1) the two entities meet with school personnel to discuss alternative education options, and (2) the student and parent or guardian sign a written petition to withdraw from school. Any person of compulsory age who is not attending school and is not excused is considered a truant after three days of absences. Dropouts fall into two main categories: (1) out-of-school youth of compulsory age who are not excused and have not been adjudicated for truancy, and (2) adults above compulsory age who never received a diploma.

HOW DOES MINNESOTA CALCULATE GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES?

In 2009, the Minnesota Department of Education began calculating and reporting graduation rates and corresponding dropout rates in three ways: four-year, five-year, and adequate yearly progress (AYP) graduation rates (see *Graduation Indicators Defined*¹). A standard methodology for computing these rates was recommended by the National Governors Association (2005b) and further refined in the federal nonregulatory guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education (2008a).

Minnesota recomputed and published the four-year and five-year graduation rates using this standard methodology for all years available. The AYP graduation rate will continue to be available until 2012; at that time, the AYP graduation rate will begin using the four-year and five-year rates in its measurements. The AYP rate is much higher than the four- or five-year graduation rates because it considers only part of the available student group: those who were last reported as graduated and those reported as dropping out. It does not consider students reported as continuing their education or students whose end status is unknown. (For information about

specific graduation rates by school or district, visit the Minnesota Department of Education's *School Report Card Information* webpage.²)

The Minnesota Department of Education receives information from schools and districts on the numbers of students who drop out of school or who graduate from school through the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System, also known as MARSS³. After the MARSS student counts are received, graduation and dropout rates can be calculated.

WHAT IS THE EXTENT OF THE DROPOUT PROBLEM IN MINNESOTA?

In order to fully understand the dropout picture in Minnesota, policymakers might consider the graduation data within a larger context. A data analysis conducted by REL Midwest (2009) indicated that in Minnesota, as in other states, dropping out is more prevalent in highly populated urban districts of larger metropolitan areas; also, as in national trends, the incidence of dropping out in Minnesota seems to correlate with poverty levels—with the poorest districts having the lowest graduation rates—and with mothers' education levels.

¹ See <http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/groups/InformationTech/documents/Report/014799.pdf> (Minnesota Department of Education, 2009).

² See <http://education.state.mn.us/ReportCard2005/index.do> (Minnesota Department of Education, 2008d).

³ See http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Accountability_Programs/Program_Finance/MARSS_Student_Accounting/index.html (Minnesota Department of Education, 2008c).

The Minnesota Dropout, Retention, and Graduation Initiative

In 2005, Minnesota was one of two states awarded a three-year School Dropout Prevention Program grant (see U.S. Department of Education, 2006).⁴ The Minnesota Department of Education proposed to use the grant to work with the Minnesota departments of Human Services, Public Safety, and Employment and Economic Development to decrease the dropout rate among minority and low-income students in pilot districts across the state. This initiative became known as the Minnesota Dropout Prevention, Retention, and Graduation Initiative. The initiative continues to be spearheaded by the Minnesota Department of Education but has involved stakeholders from other state agencies, nongovernmental local and state organizations, the governor's office, the state Legislature, and participating districts.

A steering committee comprising several of these representatives was commissioned to oversee and coordinate the initiative as well as to develop a report with specific recommendations for how the work of the initiative would be carried forward after the three-year grant period ended. According to the *Dropout Prevention, Retention, and Graduation Initiative Steering Committee Report: Insights and Recommendations*⁵

(Minnesota Department of Education, 2008b), the five primary goals of the grant were as follows:

- Develop a comprehensive dropout prevention model for implementation at high school and middle school levels.
- Develop tools that can be used to enhance the development and implementation of effective programming.
- Increase statewide and local coordination to address dropout prevention.
- Provide support and technical assistance for local education agencies.
- Increase the likelihood of continued implementation of successful dropout prevention components and sustainability of grant success beyond the funding period. (p. 6)

To achieve these goals, the Minnesota Department of Education, in conjunction with its partners, utilized 10 effective strategies for dropout prevention identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. The 10 strategies were selected from research on dropout prevention summarized by Smink and Reimer (2005) in *15 Effective Strategies for Improving Student Attendance and Truancy Prevention*.

⁴ The U.S. Department of Education awarded School Dropout Prevention Program grants to Minnesota and New Hampshire in FY 2005. In FY 2006, two additional grants were awarded to Arizona and Texas.

⁵ See <http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/groups/InformationTech/documents/Report/014799.pdf> (Minnesota Department of Education, 2008b).

Using this core framework of strategies, the Minnesota Department of Education developed tools and processes for district- and school-level teams to select and implement approaches to dropout prevention. Each participating district developed a comprehensive system of student supports to promote school completion. The resulting programs are unique to each school community and continue to be implemented in the seven pilot districts in Minnesota: Brooklyn Center, Duluth, Hibbing, Park Rapids, Red Lake, Richfield, and St. Paul.⁶

In conjunction with these efforts, the Office of Governor Tim Pawlenty received a \$25,000 grant from America's Promise Alliance in 2007 to host a statewide Summit on Youth Development and Graduation. This summit, titled "Inspiring New Action—Inspiring New Commitment," was cohosted by the Minnesota Department of Education and the Minnesota Alliance With Youth and took place on December 5, 2007. The purpose of the summit was to issue a statewide call to action regarding the dropout problem in Minnesota and to engage community, philanthropic, and business partners as well as other education stakeholders across the state to focus on promoting positive youth development and improving student outcomes—especially in the area of graduation. More than 450 attendees were present at the summit, which featured a keynote speech from Peter Benson, Ph.D., president of the Search Institute, and awards given by Governor Pawlenty and Lieutenant Governor Carol Molnau.

As a result of the successful summit, America's Promise Alliance partner State Farm and the Minnesota Department of Education awarded the Minnesota Alliance With Youth a grant to host 10 smaller community summits throughout Minnesota. The primary purposes of these summits were to disseminate information on best practices in dropout prevention and to provide a networking opportunity for schools and local agencies working on dropout prevention to leverage resources and enhance partnerships toward a common goal. These efforts have led to another statewide Minnesota Dropout Prevention Summit to be held in November 2009, for which this report was commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Education in collaboration with its summit partners (Search Institute, Minnesota Alliance With Youth, National Youth Leadership Council, and State Farm).

This report defines the ways in which graduation rates and dropout rates can be reported. It discusses state and federal efforts for improving graduation rates and then focuses on pressing policy questions that are relevant for Minnesota policymakers. Next, it presents a synopsis of each of the 10 effective strategies for engaging students in school and learning. Finally, it provides a list of national foundation and organization websites and a comprehensive list of references and additional resources for further inquiry. The 10 effective strategies for dropout prevention are detailed in separate sheets that are housed in the back cover pocket of this report.

⁶ See http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Academic_Excellence/Dropout_Prevent_Reten_Grad_Init/index.html (Minnesota Department of Education, 2008a) for more information about the Dropout Prevention, Retention, and Graduation Initiative.

Nationwide Efforts to Improve Graduation Rates

UNIFORM GRADUATION RATES

Graduation data can be reported in numerous ways, and states currently do so, often reporting different rates to suit a particular purpose, audience, or compliance requirement. Following is a brief breakdown of some of the more common methods for calculating graduation rates.

- The *leaver rate* or *departure classification index* is calculated by dividing the number of students who received standard high school diplomas by the total number of students who have dropped out, graduated with a standard diploma, or graduated with other completion credentials.
- The *adjusted cohort rate* calculates graduation rates by dividing the number of graduates with a regular high school diploma in an adjusted cohort by the number in the adjusted cohort. The adjusted cohort is the number of first-time ninth graders four years ago; plus students who transfer into the cohort; minus students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or are deceased. The adjusted cohort rate is one of the ways in which Minnesota calculates dropouts.
- The *cumulative promotion index* (CPI) is the calculation method used by Christopher Swanson in the Editorial Projects in Education *Cities in Crisis* reports (Swanson, 2008, 2009). The CPI “captures the four key steps a student must take in order to graduate: three grade-to-grade promotions (9 to 10, 10 to 11, and 11 to 12) and ultimately earning a diploma (grade 12 to graduation)” (Swanson, 2009, p. 10).

Each of these four steps is represented in the formula by a ratio. For example, the 9-to-10 promotion is calculated by dividing the number of 10th-grade students in the fall by the number of ninth-grade students the previous fall. The four ratios are then multiplied together to generate the CPI graduation rate.

- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) currently reports graduation rates for all states and districts using the *averaged freshman graduation rate* (AFGR). The AFGR is calculated by dividing the number of regular diploma recipients in a given year by the average of the membership in Grades 8, 9, and 10 that had been reported five, four, and three years earlier. Because AFGR data are available for most states and districts, it is a useful means of comparing graduation rates across different locations. There is still variation, however, in how states and localities define and approach the individual components that are used to determine the AFGR.

In addition to reporting graduation rates, states and districts also may report *dropout rates*—estimates of the percentage of students who drop out of school. Dropout rates can be calculated in different ways:

- The *event dropout rate* is the percentage of students exiting high school without a diploma in a given year.
- The *status dropout rate* measures the percentage of individuals 16 to 24 years old who are not in school and have no diploma.

- The *cohort dropout rate* or *longitudinal dropout rate* measures the percentage of students who drop out within a cohort of students that is followed over time (e.g., the percentage of students who started high school in a given year and, as of four years later, have dropped out of school).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), requires that state accountability be measured in part by the “graduation rate,” defined as the percentage of students graduating in “the standard number of years” with a regular diploma (one aligned with state standards, and not a general equivalency diploma [GED]). Absent detailed regulatory guidance, graduation rates have been calculated numerous ways, using a variety of methods and assumptions. The National Governors Association (2005a) made a 50-state compact to adopt a common cohort formula for all states to use in calculating graduation rates by 2012. Federal regulations issued in late 2008 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008a) clarify what is meant by “graduation rate” under NCLB and require states to begin calculating graduation rates using an adjusted cohort formula similar to the rate established by the National Governors Association compact. States must begin reporting the adjusted cohort formula for the 2010–11 school year, and this formula will be used for purposes of determining AYP under NCLB for the 2011–12 school year. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has indicated that he supports these graduation rate regulations (see U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

One issue related to the federal reporting requirements is how to account for students who take longer than four years to graduate from high school. The key indicators for graduation rates factor in students who graduate in the standard number of years; schools, districts, and states typically are not able to include students who drop out and later reenter and successfully graduate. Under the current regulations, however, states may report a separate “extended year” graduation rate in addition to the main indicator. This other rate can include students who take longer than four years to graduate. The extended rate may be considered as part of the calculations for determining AYP.

STATE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE GRADUATION RATES

Several states have passed laws or otherwise adopted policies for deterring students from dropping out. These efforts range from isolated policy changes to large-scale comprehensive efforts. Many of the programs and initiatives that were developed and supported as a result of these laws and policies connect to the 10 strategies that served as focus areas for the 2007 Minnesota Summit on Youth Development and Graduation. Examples may provide insight for Minnesota policymakers interested in finding ways to address the dropout issue.

Some recent examples of state laws and policies are provided in Table 1. Although many of these strategies have yet to be fully tested, some states report that the graduation picture is changing as a result of their legislation and initiatives.

Table 1. Recent Policy Activity Related to Improving Graduation Rates⁷

State	Recent Policy Activity
Alabama	SB 334 (2009) increases the compulsory age of attendance to 17, creates a Dropout Prevention and Recovery Fund, directs the Alabama Department of Education to establish intervention procedures for schools with lower graduation rates, and requires data collection on key measures related to high school completion.
Arkansas	HB 1956 (2009) establishes the Project Graduation Commission to research and recommend dropout prevention strategies and examine the economic impact of graduation rates. SB 918 (2009) establishes the Smart Core Incentive Funding Program to provide support to assist students in completing the state's Smart Core curriculum.
Colorado	HB 1423 (2009) establishes the Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement and creates the Student Re-engagement Grant Program. HB 1280 (2009) establishes a National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Corps program in the state. SB 90 (2009) establishes a state advisory council for parent involvement in education in the Colorado Department of Education to focus on several issues including dropout prevention. SB 123 (2009) establishes a student support and wellness program with several goals, including improving attendance and graduation rates. In addition, HB 08-1370 (2008) establishes the School Counselor Corps Grant Program for the purpose of reducing dropout rates by providing funding for school counselors in the secondary grades, and HB 1336 (2008) establishes truancy reporting and attendance monitoring procedures.
Illinois	SB 1796 (2009) forms the Illinois Hope and Opportunity Pathways through Education (IHOPE) Program with the goal of reengaging dropouts in programs to help them complete high school. HJR 87 (2007) establishes the Task Force on Re-Enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School.
Indiana	HB 1343 (2009) creates a Dropout Prevention Fund to support programs that identify students at risk of dropping out. HB 1419 (2009) mandates that school corporations establish plans for improving discipline systems and behavior, which include alternatives to student suspension or expulsion and encouragement of parent involvement.
Louisiana	SB 316 (2009) establishes a state initiative aimed at increasing graduation rates and preparing high school students for postsecondary education and work. HB 731 (2009) establishes legal responsibilities and consequences for students, parents, and legal custodians related to student truancy. In addition, HB 1091 (2008) mandates exit interviews and parental consent for students who drop out.
Maine	SB 528 (2009) establishes the Center of Excellence for At-Risk Students. This center provides instruction and support to students at risk of dropping out.

⁷ The information in Table 1 was obtained by cross-referencing the bill-tracking databases on several websites: the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Education Commission of the States, and state legislature databases. The information was accessed in August 2009.

State	Recent Policy Activity
Maryland	SB 264 (2008) requires local education agencies to provide information about alternative education and high school equivalency programs to individuals who have dropped out and have not yet earned a high school diploma or certificate. SB 59 (2006) mandates the use of a cohort formula for calculating graduation rates.
Massachusetts	SB 2766 (2008) creates a prevention and dropout recovery commission to identify best practices and evaluate existing programs; it also implements a system to collect longitudinal data.
Mississippi	Mississippi Board of Education Policy 3105 (2007) establishes a comprehensive Dropout Prevention Plan in connection with specific goals for increasing the graduation rate and decreasing the dropout and truancy rates.
Missouri	SB 291 (2009) establishes the Persistence to Graduation Fund, which funds districts in implementing dropout prevention programs.
Nevada	SB 77 (2009) permits school district boards to establish mentoring programs aimed at supporting student engagement, middle to high school transition, and school completion. AB 487 (2009) mandates district plans and supports for students transitioning from elementary school to middle school or junior high school.
North Carolina	HB 187 (2009) mandates that local school boards implement policies for supporting pregnant students and students who are parents and helping them to remain enrolled in and complete school. It also includes several recommendations for board policies related to the support of students in middle to high school transition, the reduction of the amounts of student suspensions and expulsions, and the support of suspended students.
Oklahoma	HB 1050 (2009) establishes a mentoring program designed to help at-risk students graduate.
Texas	HB 2237 (2007) requires a study of best practices to prevent students from dropping out, authorizes funding for student club activities for students at risk of dropping out, and mandates that districts with high dropout rates develop detailed dropout prevention strategy plans.
Utah	R277-702 (2009) allows students who have not completed school or passed the General Educational Development exam to return to their school prior to their class's graduation in order to work to complete the requirements for a traditional high school diploma.
Vermont	HB 405 (2009) supports research on high school improvement and the implementation of a longitudinal data system.
Virginia	HB 259 (2009) establishes record-keeping and follow-up procedures related to student transfers. HB 1794 (2009) requires that students cannot be suspended because of truancy alone.
Wyoming	SB 60 (2009) establishes a National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program in the state.

FEDERAL STEPS TO IMPROVE GRADUATION RATES

The federal government supports state and local efforts to address the dropout issue, primarily through the funding of programs and research. In the past, the U.S. Department of Education (2008b) has awarded grants to state and local education agencies for “dropout prevention and reentry programs” through the School Dropout Prevention Program, though funds have not been appropriated for this program since fiscal year 2006. The Education Department also supports the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and the National

Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, both of which disseminate research and resources related to dropout prevention practices. The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) sponsors research on the dropout issue through a variety of programs and projects. The recent passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) will provide funding opportunities for a range of education programs, some of which likely will relate to the goal of improving graduation outcomes. In addition, Congress is considering a number of legislative proposals addressing the dropout issue, some of which are tied to the reauthorization of ESEA.

Pressing Policy Questions for Minnesota

The following questions⁸ focus on issues that Minnesota policymakers might consider when working to address the dropout problem in their state.

1. Why are students in your school, district, community, or state dropping out of school?

Surveys and interviews of students who have dropped out reveal a number of reasons for their decisions, ranging from boredom, to course failure, to social and economic situations. The student-reported reasons can differ from those reported by parents and educators. Conducting a similar inquiry with dropouts in your region could provide insight into how to keep students from leaving the system

and reengage those students who already have left.

2. What is the extent of the dropout crisis in your school, district, community, or state?

Knowing the nature of the problem is a critical first step in addressing it. Policymakers seeking to understand their particular issues might consider not only the current graduation and dropout rates but also how those rates have changed over time. An inquiry into the reasons why students are dropping out, if possible, could provide insight into how to keep students from leaving the system and reengage those students who already have left.

⁸ Many of these questions were derived from questions posed in the briefing report titled *Dropout Prevention: Strategies for Improving High School Graduation Rates*, prepared by the Center for Child and Family Policy (2008) at Duke University. The report was published in connection with the North Carolina Family Impact Seminar titled “Dropout Prevention: Strategies for Improving High School Graduation Rates,” held in June 2008.

3. Why does lowering the dropout rate matter?

What are the goals underlying dropout prevention policies? To increase the number of students earning a high school diploma? To help students become educated, productive citizens? Both?

4. What is the basis for this concern?

What parts of the dropout problem most concern you? Is it the size of the problem now or trends that point to more serious issues to come? Are you more concerned with disparities of race, ethnicity, or class than with the overall problem? What if you were able to decrease the dropout rate but disproportions remained?

5. What types of programs could be supported?

What if a program focused resources on students on the cusp of succeeding, diverting resources from those students who have the most severe problems?

What about using financial incentives, such as gift certificates or even cash to keep students in school? What might be the consequences of using rule-based, punitive measures to address the dropout issue?

6. Do resources exist that can be incorporated into new prevention or recovery strategies?

Does your school, district, community, or state have resources that can be reorganized or repurposed to address the dropout issue? These resources could be individuals, funds, programs, technology, or even information. For example, what sorts of data do you already have that might support an early warning system to identify students at risk of dropping out?

10 Strategies for Engaging Students in School and Learning

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N)⁹, based at Clemson University in South Carolina, serves as a research center and resource network for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. Its mission is to reshape school and community environments to meet the needs of youth in at-risk situations so these students receive the quality education and services necessary to succeed academically and graduate from high school.

As a part of its work, NDPC/N has identified 15 strategies that are effective for preventing students from dropping out. Each of the 15 strategies is described on the *Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention* webpage¹⁰ (NDPC/N, 2009a). The Minnesota Dropout Prevention, Retention, and Graduation Initiative is using 10 of the strategies as a framework for districts to use in making decisions about how to engage students in middle schools and high schools. Those strategies were adapted¹¹ by the Minnesota Department of Education (n.d.) as follows:

School-Community Collaboration

When all groups in a community provide collective support to the school, a strong infrastructure results. This promotes and sustains a caring, supportive environment where youth can thrive and achieve.

Safe Learning Environments

A comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, must deal

with potential violence as well as crisis management. A safe learning environment provides daily experiences, at all grade levels, that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students.

Family Engagement

Research consistently finds that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on children's achievement and is important to student success in school.

Literacy Development

Interventions to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all other subjects.

Mentoring/Tutoring

Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity, focuses on academics and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies.

Service-Learning

Service-learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching/learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels.

⁹ See the NDPC/N website at <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/ndpcdefault.htm> (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009b).

¹⁰ See <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/> (NDPC/N, 2009a).

¹¹ See http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=010795&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.).

Alternative Schooling

Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student's individual social needs and academic requirements for a high school diploma.

After-School Opportunities

Many schools provide after-school and summer enhancement programs that eliminate information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure because they fill the afternoon "gap time" with constructive and engaging activities.

Professional Development

Teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need to feel supported and have an avenue by which they can continue to develop skills, techniques, and learn about innovative strategies.

Contextualized and Active/ Individualized Learning

Active learning embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. Students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong

learners when educators show them that there are different ways to learn. Each student has unique interests and past learning experiences. An individualized instructional program for each student allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies to consider these individual differences.

Note: More detailed information for each strategy appears on the separate sheets that appear in the pocket folder of this report. Those 10 sheets provide answers to the following questions:

- What is the strategy? How is it defined in the literature?
- Why is it important? What does the research say about its effectiveness in improving student social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes?
- What are some best practices, as suggested by the literature, that relevant stakeholders should know to implement the strategy successfully?

Websites of National Foundations and Organizations

Recent attention to the severity and impact of the dropout crisis has encouraged research and reporting on the problem as well as potential solutions. Minnesota policymakers may find the following Web-based resources useful:

Alliance for Excellent Education

<http://www.all4ed.org/>

America's Promise Alliance: Dropout Prevention

<http://www.silentepidemic.org/Our-Work/Dropout-Prevention.aspx>

Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University

<http://web.jhu.edu/csos/>

Education Policy Center of the Urban Institute

<http://www.urban.org/center/epc/>

Everyone Graduates Center

<http://www.every1graduates.org/>

Harlem Children's Zone

<http://www.hcz.org/>

Jobs for the Future

<http://www.jff.org/>

National Dropout Prevention Centers: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities

<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/>

Philadelphia's Project U-Turn

<http://www.projectuturn.net/>

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STRATEGY 1

School-Community Collaboration

WHAT IS SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION?

School-community collaboration can be defined as partnerships between schools and community individuals, businesses, and organizations that are leveraged to promote students' emotional, social and intellectual development (Sanders, 2001). These partnerships can differ in content and scope and can provide an array of resources and support for youth, such as after-school activities (e.g., tutoring, job shadowing, academic enrichment) and collaboration with specialized service agencies (e.g., health clinics and child-welfare agencies). Partnerships can be student centered, school centered, family centered, or community centered or can be a combination of multiple partnerships (Sanders, 2006). There is no "one size fits all" formula for effective school-community collaboration, though research suggests that a willingness among partners to work together and share responsibility to meet the needs of the students can lead to a successful and effective partnership (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004).

WHY IS SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION IMPORTANT?

Emerging research suggests a positive correlation between school-community collaboration and student learning. Researchers maintain that community involvement is important because schools alone cannot ameliorate educational outcomes for students (Sanders, 2001). Because schools cannot provide youth with

all the necessary resources that they need in the 21st century, a school-community partnership can help leverage community resources to strengthen the social capital available to children (Sanders, 2006). A study by Epstein (1995) also suggests that the development of these alliances can benefit both the school and the community. Other benefits include building and maintaining healthy communities and providing youth with a richer and more authentic learning experience by augmenting connections to schools. Strengthening the connection between school and community and helping engage students in learning can help decrease dropout rates and increase attendance rates among youth (Mastro & Jalloh, 2005).

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES IN SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION?

- Create schools that are well organized and goal oriented in order to increase the chances of attracting potential community partners.
- Ensure that community partners are part of a school's overall strategy to support a student-centered learning environment that highly values student success and achievement.
- Develop effective community partnership teams to achieve schoolwide goals.
- Include parents, teachers, administrators, and community representatives on school-community partnership teams to come together as a group to plan and implement partnership activities.

- Ensure the presence of strong principal leadership, a critical component of successful school-community collaborations, by having principals model an openness to parent and community involvement, establish dialogue among school personnel and the community, and support others in the collaboration efforts.
- Obtain external support from state and district offices that encourage school-community collaboration to promote schools' efforts for maintaining and increasing community involvement.

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STRATEGY 2

Safe Learning Environments

WHAT ARE SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS?

According to the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2009), a safe learning environment is “focused on academic achievement, maintaining high standards, fostering positive relationships between staff and students, and encouraging parental and community involvement.” Safe learning environments are those that are free from aggression, violence, and bullying. Other characteristics of safe learning environments include the creation of outlets for student expression, the utilization of conflict-resolution strategies, and well-developed and well-communicated emergency response plans for schools (Pollack & Sundermann, 2001).

WHY ARE SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IMPORTANT?

Safe learning environments are an important factor of student motivation (Smink & Reimer, 2005). Proponents of safe learning environments argue that students are more likely to want to attend a school that has a respectful, caring, and welcoming environment than one in which bullying, violence, and negative attitudes prevail. Anti-bullying programs, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, have shown positive effects on decreasing antisocial behaviors such as fighting, theft, vandalism, misbehavior, alcohol use, and truancy (Fox, Elliott, Kerlikowske, Newman, & Christeson, 2003). Also, studies show that students who

are identified as bullies are more likely than their peers to be incarcerated later in life (Fox et al., 2003).

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES FOR CREATING SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS?

- Focus on academic achievement.
- Engage family and community members in school processes and communicate with them on a regular basis.
- Create positive relationships among students and faculty.
- Create a respectful atmosphere by encouraging students to express their opinions, feelings, concerns, and ideas in an open, caring environment.
- Integrate conflict resolution as part of the curriculum.
- Develop partnerships with law enforcement personnel, and utilize these relationships to develop an emergency response plan.

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STRATEGY 3

Family Engagement

WHAT IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

Family engagement can be defined as the inclusion of a student's parents, guardians, and/or other relatives or caretakers in decisions that affect the student's academic, social, and emotional well-being as well as the school community as a whole.

WHY IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

A synthesis of research by Henderson and Mapp (2002) concluded that there is a positive relationship between family engagement and improved student academic achievement. This connection holds true across socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds for students of all ages (Mapp, 2004). These findings have led federal programs such as Head Start, Follow Through, Chapter 1/ Title I, and Special Education to mandate the inclusion of parents and family as a criterion of the program. In addition, the Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) process has shown positive effects on student achievement at the middle school level (Epstein & Dauber, 1995). Studies show that linguistically and culturally diverse families may be more hesitant to initiate communication with a child's school for lack of knowledge of the conversational language or cultural norms (Naughton, 2004). Engaging diverse families proactively can help overcome some of these barriers.

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

- Create a communications system that allows easy access for family members to teachers and vice versa; the system should allow parents/guardians to check students'

academic and attendance records and provide feedback to educators.

- Develop an understanding of the family's past experiences, current situation, concerns, and strengths.
- Recruit and retain staff who are equipped to communicate with a variety of different types of families.
- Provide professional development for educators on communication with family members.

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STRATEGY 4

Literacy Development

WHAT IS LITERACY DEVELOPMENT?

Literacy development is the set of abilities and skills that children must acquire in order to become successful readers (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). It is an effort to understand both oral and written language and involves phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and the mechanics of language (Stegelin, 2002). Literacy development can be facilitated by interventions that guide low-achieving students in improving their reading and writing skills (Smink & Reiner, 2005). Strategies for developing literacy typically focus on reading skills and higher-order thinking skills so that students are able to analyze and comprehend ideas (Northwest Educational Technology Consortium, 2005).

WHY IS LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IMPORTANT?

Success in secondary and postsecondary school is equated with having strong literacy skills (Steinberg & Almeida, 2004). Also, having strong reading and writing skills is essential for succeeding in school and in the workplace (Berman, 2005). Research has shown that early literacy development is pivotal in a child's success in school. Other studies show that struggling adolescent readers often have consistent problems with fluency and comprehension; by the time they enter high school, they are ill-prepared to succeed in other subjects (Berman, 2005). Therefore, early literacy development plays a major role in addressing the issue of readiness and dropout prevention (Stegelin, 2002). Organizations such as the National

Association of Secondary School Principals advocate for ongoing literacy programs at the middle and high school levels (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009). Research shows that providing literacy programs and including literacy strategies in all content areas at the high school level is beneficial to students (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES IN LITERACY DEVELOPMENT?

- Build support for a state focus on literacy development, and increase literacy expectations across all grades.
- Encourage and facilitate early literacy development by providing a print-rich and literacy-rich environment as well as opportunities for students to work in these environments.
- Administer formal assessments and utilize the data to inform teachers on how they can change their instruction to better fit the needs of their students.
- Encourage ongoing professional development that is designed to give teachers the necessary instructional skills to integrate literacy strategies into their daily instruction; ensure that the professional development is connected with curriculum and instruction.
- Engage students in strategies for preliteracy, during literacy, and postliteracy by activating the students' prior knowledge and building on their learning to enable them to move toward critical thinking and reflection.

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STRATEGY 5

Mentoring/Tutoring

WHAT IS MENTORING/TUTORING?

Mentoring is a structured and sustained relationship that connects a young person with a caring individual who offers support, guidance, and assistance (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2007). Mentors can have multiple roles by providing academic support through tutoring. Not all mentoring programs have the same goals, structure, or emphasis, but they have shown to be an effective tool in enhancing the positive development of youth (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2007). Mentoring programs can be community based or school based (e.g., tutoring programs); most target the at-risk student population.

WHY IS MENTORING/TUTORING IMPORTANT?

The necessity for mentoring comes from the idea that if a caring and involved adult is accessible to a young person, that young person will more likely become a successful adult (Jekielek, Moore, Hair & Scarupa, 2002). Through mentoring, adults can provide support that may be absent in a child's life. These supports can be through financial assistance, tutoring, and efforts to enhance self-esteem and control (Jekielek et al., 2002). Many at-risk youth lack these types of support at home, and mentoring has been shown to meet those needs (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2007). Research has shown that the best mentoring relationships are those in which the mentor is involved for a longer period of time. A case study analysis by De Anda (2001) found evidence that a mentoring

relationship can positively impact the lives of at-risk youth. Studies also have shown that students who are mentored have higher graduation rates, attend school regularly, and fail fewer courses (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz., 2009).

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES IN MENTORING/TUTORING?

- Facilitate high levels of interaction between mentors and youth by creating a structured, well-planned program.
- Ensure that the mentoring program is driven by the needs and interests of the youth, rather than the needs of the adult volunteers.
- Select mentors with previous relevant experience that will benefit participating youth.
- Require a long-term commitment (at least one year) from mentors.
- Maintain the enthusiasm and interests of both the mentors and participating youth to ensure maximum retention and benefit.

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STRATEGY 6

Service-Learning

WHAT IS SERVICE-LEARNING?

Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection in order to enrich the learning experience; it teaches civic responsibility, enhances student motivation, and fortifies communities (Learn and Serve Clearinghouse, 2008). Service-learning opportunities encourage active learning and engage students in real-world experiences (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Wulsin, 2008). These opportunities not only involve students in solving community problems but also help them learn and apply reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies (National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002). Service-learning serves a dual purpose by benefiting students as well as the community receiving the service. These programs often are organized and offered by community organizations, local school districts, and institutions of higher education.

WHY IS SERVICE-LEARNING IMPORTANT?

Studies on service-learning have shown positive effects in students' learning and social development. A study by the National Youth Leadership Council (2009) demonstrates that students who contribute to service-learning projects develop greater civic engagement as well as higher frequencies of engagement in community issues, voting, and volunteering during adulthood. Other studies indicate that service-learning participation encourages youth to make more positive choices because they feel more connected to their neighborhoods and are less likely to

engage in deviant behavior (Libbey, Ireland, & Resnick, 2002; Widome, Sieving, Harpin, & Hearst, 2008).

There is growing evidence that service-learning can help reduce the achievement gaps, especially among students from low-income homes, by incorporating pedagogy that encourages student participation (National Youth Leadership Council, 2009). Service-learning also can be used as a counter for disengagement among youth. Studies have shown that students who are involved in service-learning are more motivated and engaged, perhaps because they are given greater autonomy and control over what they are learning (Eccles, Midgely & Adler, 1984).

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES IN SERVICE-LEARNING PROGRAMS?

- Provide teachers with support associated with service-learning through trainings and conferences outside the school.
- Allow for flexible scheduling—such as block scheduling or intersession—to make service-learning opportunities more logistically feasible.
- Employ a service-learning coordinator who is responsible for developing relationships with the community and organizing activities. If funding is an issue, use a volunteer from the community or another organization.
- Develop an after-school program based on service-learning that is aligned with the school curriculum. Have teachers coordinate the work as an expanded learning opportunity.

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STRATEGY 7

Alternative Schooling

WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLING?

An alternative school offers learning experiences beyond those provided by traditional schools. Alternative schooling is usually part of a middle or high school program that is geared toward at-risk youth and is part of a district's comprehensive dropout prevention program (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009). Often, alternative schools have a specific curricular focus (e.g., mathematics and science, music, dance) or can be found within a school in which students are placed based on their strengths (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009). Alternative schools are characterized as being very supportive environments with smaller class sizes in which the students receive more individualized attention (Bullock, 2007). Alternative schools also can include schools that are focused on innovation or remediation. Such schools can provide potential dropouts with a variety of options that can ultimately lead to graduation. These schools pay attention to each student's individual social needs as well as the academic requirements needed to obtain a high school diploma.

WHY IS ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLING IMPORTANT?

Research has shown that alternative schools that focus on education instead of discipline are effective for students at risk of dropping out (Franklin, Streeter, Kim & Tripodi, 2007). Many at-risk youth are academically capable of finishing school if they are given the right type of educational choices (Franklin et al., 2007). Alternative schools can be beneficial

to students because they offer more individualized attention and create an environment in which students are expected to do well—two factors that research has shown to improve academic achievement (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES IN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLING?

- Institute a low student-to-teacher ratio because smaller classes provide an environment that promotes student learning and narrows the achievement gaps.
- Develop a curriculum that meets the needs of students with different learning styles.
- Within the school, create a sense of community in which students and staff share goals and students are encouraged to pursue a variety of courses and interests.
- Create highly structured classrooms that incorporate behavioral classroom management.
- Create a safe and caring environment so that students are motivated to learn and excel academically.

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STRATEGY 8

After-School Activities

WHAT ARE AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES?

After-school activities are expanded learning opportunities that provide a wide range of supports for young people and usually take place before school, after school, on the weekends, or during the summer months. After-school programs can provide young people with opportunities to engage in safe and supervised activities that promote learning across contexts and developmental stages (Little, 2009). Examples of activities that are offered through these programs include tutoring, recreation, arts and music programs, and character education, among others (Minnesota Department of Education, 2006).

WHY ARE AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES IMPORTANT?

Many children and youth lack adult supervision during after-school hours due to an increasing number of parents in the workforce (Apsler, 2009). This increase in unsupervised children has resulted in a higher demand for quality after-school programs with an emphasis on academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Research on after-school programs has shown positive effects on social outcomes, decreases in risky behavior, and increases in positive attitudes toward school and learning (Hammond & Reiner, 2006). After-school programs provide a safe haven for many children, particularly those who live in an unsafe environment or engage in risky behavior. Having a safe, supervised environment after school for youth is important because studies show that the peak time in which children and youth commit or are victims of crime and

drug use is between the hours of 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. (Metz, Goldsmith, & Arbreton, 2008).

Furthermore, participation in after-school programs and activities can lower dropout rates, improve school attendance, improve grades and test scores, and keep kids safe and healthy (Afterschool Alliance, 2008; Little, 2009). Granger (2008) performed an empirical review on the effects of after-school programs and concluded that on average, such programs had a positive impact on academic outcomes. Another recent study that evaluated academic instruction in after-school programs found that participation in the programs positively impacted learning as a result of targeted work on specific skills (Black, Dolittle, Zhu, Unterman, & Grossman, 2008).

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES IN AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES?

- Build strong partnerships between schools and after-school programs to produce greater support for student success and improve program quality.
- Offer students focused and intentional activities along with the supervision necessary to keep them motivated and out of trouble.
- Hire staff who are intentional in developing positive and quality interactions among the youth in order to improve youth perception of the benefits of a program.
- Offer a multitude of opportunities that can include academic offerings (e.g., tutoring, homework assistance), enrichment and learning (e.g., field trips, visual/performing arts), and community service.

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STRATEGY 9

Professional Development

WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

According to the National Staff Development Council (2001), professional development must be results driven, standards based, and job embedded. The METworksSM Framework developed by Learning Point Associates (Behrstock & Meyer, 2009) states, "Programs that support [professional development] include but are not limited to peer observation, mentoring, teacher portfolios, action research projects, whole faculty or team/department study groups, curriculum planning and development, literature circles, critical friends groups, data analysis, school improvement planning, analyzing student work, lesson study, and teacher self-assessment and goal setting activities" (p. 121).

WHY IS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IMPORTANT?

During preservice training, teachers do not receive all the knowledge or develop all the skills they will need over the entire span of their careers (Elmore, 2002). Therefore, it is imperative that teachers augment their preservice education with ongoing knowledge and skills training to ensure effective instruction. Studies show that high-quality professional development can have positive impacts on student achievement when implemented correctly (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009).

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

- Ensure that professional development is results driven, standards based, and job embedded.

- Ensure that educators are taught to implement differentiated instructional practices as a requirement of continued licensure.
- Create professional development activities that are relevant to teachers' curricula and content areas.
- Develop activities for ongoing training to unfold over a duration of several weeks or months to ensure time for teachers to build on complex ideas.

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STRATEGY 10

Contextualized and Active/Individualized Learning

WHAT IS CONTEXTUALIZED AND ACTIVE/INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING?

Because not all students have similar learning styles, teachers must find ways to effectively instruct and motivate different types of student learners. Contextualized and active/individualized learning refers to the use of pedagogical strategies that engage and involve students in the classroom based on a student's individual needs. Teachers who facilitate these types of learning are intentional in using a variety of activities that are customized to the different learning styles among the students (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009).

WHY IS CONTEXTUALIZED AND ACTIVE/INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING IMPORTANT?

Research has shown that individualized and active learning can be effective if the teacher is intentional about the pace, method, and content of instruction (Betrus, 2009). Research also indicates that teachers need to utilize classroom strategies that will promote interactive learning and stimulate thinking (Buehl, 2001). In order to know which strategies to use, teachers must first determine the learning style of each student. This determination can be achieved by observation, questioning, or the use of formative assessments in the classroom (Koralek, 2009). The use of these tools will help teachers understand, appreciate, and build upon student differences so that they can adjust the content of instruction (Tomlinson, 1999). Individualizing is essential to advancement

of appropriate practice and can be particularly effective among at-risk students (Koralek, 2009).

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES IN CONTEXTUALIZED AND ACTIVE/INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING?

- Use formative assessments to determine where each student lies academically, and determine the best strategies to use that encourage active and contextualized learning.
- Utilize activities such as peer tutoring, journaling, role play, simulation, cooperative learning, and problem-based learning in the classroom.
- Provide students with more challenging tasks during the times in which they are the most responsive.
- Make plans and adjustments to promote each student's development and learning based on information that has been gathered.
- Choose materials and lessons that are culturally relevant and appropriate to each student's developmental level.
- Encourage participation by offering opportunities for students to respond.

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