



Recover and Re-engage Youth

Supporting Research

Across the state, Minnesota has a fractured system for finding dropouts, transferring credit and information between school districts, and ensuring services to address the educational and personal needs of dropouts, or those on the verge of doing so. A functional and coordinated system must be developed to re-engage these students in school and provide alternative learning options to earn a diploma. Two issues are key: (1) after a student is dropped, the school is no longer responsible, and the whereabouts of many students become unknown; and, (2) students who move to another school or school district in the state often lose credit for their learning because of inconsistent credit tracking and varying graduation requirements among districts.

What is the research evidence supporting this recommendation?

Finding youth who have left school before graduating from high school and re-engaging them in learning is a significant educational issue in our state. Often these youth are referred to as “disconnected youth” and are defined as adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 24 who are neither working nor in school. Nationally, reports suggest there are nearly 5 million disconnected youth in America today – about one in seven young adults (12.3% ages 16-24) (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2017).

In Minnesota, 48,700 youth ages 16-24 are considered disconnected – with nearly 34,000 located in the metro areas of Minneapolis, St. Paul and Bloomington (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2017). The number of youth who are disconnected is reflected in low graduation rates and high dropout rates. For example, the public school districts of Minneapolis and St. Paul had 2016 graduation rates of 67.1 % and 76.5% respectively. Between the two cities, nearly 1400 students did not graduate in 2016 (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). In addition, the aggregate graduation rates mask unacceptable disparities between student groups. In Minneapolis, the lowest graduation rates were 52.6% for American Indian (1,227) and 65.1% for Black students (13,273). In St. Paul, the gap between graduation rates for White and American Indian students was 35%.

The costs are significant. According to a report from Civic Enterprises (2012), a 20 year-old disconnected youth can expect to earn \$392,070 less throughout their lifetime, impose a net tax burden of \$235,680 and cost the community a total of \$704,020. These young people have potential that is not fully realized due to their disengagement from education and employment (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015).

Attendance and the “15 Day Drop”

National research on absenteeism shows that in order to succeed, students need to attend school daily, and that early intervention for chronic absenteeism is critical to ensure positive student outcomes and prevent youth from dropping out of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Though commonly caused by adverse circumstances, such as poverty, health challenges, community violence, or difficult family issues, students who miss 10% of the school year (about two days each month) are more likely to fall behind or drop out (Bruce et al., 2013; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

In Minnesota, students are automatically dropped from school enrollment after 15 days of unexcused absence. The statute states “a pupil, regardless of age, who has been absent from school for 15 consecutive school days during the regular school year or for five consecutive school days during summer school or intersession classes of flexible school year programs without receiving instruction in the home or hospital shall be dropped from the roll and classified as withdrawn” (MS 126C.05 Subd 8). There is nothing in statute that requires schools to follow up with students dropped from their enrollment records. Because there is no “trigger” for a next step, former students can “disappear.” Without follow-up, too many students are lost during the 15-day drop window. Data from a capstone paper written in 2013 indicated that on average from 2011- 2013 approximately 7,805 students in Minnesota were unenrolled annually due to the 15 day policy. Some programs such as *We Want You Back* <http://ccr.mpls.k12.mn.us/wwyb> (Minneapolis Public Schools), *Diploma On* <http://www.district287.org/page.cfm?p=774> and *Project Return* <https://www.spps.org/Page/24585> (St. Paul Schools) follow up on students who have been dropped from enrollment and work to re-engage them in school and learning. Unfortunately, these programs often have limited staff and inadequate funding.

Credit Tracking Barriers: The Need for Efficient Data Systems

The Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS) is an individual student record system that serves as the Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE) primary reporting system for student data. A variety of student data are collected that are used to compile student counts, performance on state tests, attendance, demographic information and more. Each student has a unique State Student Identification (SSID) that follows them throughout their school career. Required data is submitted to MDE by every district in Minnesota. Unfortunately, this data system does not provide information in “real time” and course records and credit accumulation are not tracked. The statewide data system does not facilitate the sharing of student records between schools or school districts including enrollment status. Currently, schools only know if a student has enrolled in a different district within the same year if they receive a records request, but a request is not always made. In addition, students who move to another school or school district in the state often lose credit for their learning because of inconsistent credit tracking and varying graduation requirements among districts. A statewide student data system, that provided each student with a “data backpack,” could ensure smoother transitions and accurate records of student progress, reduce the chance of dropping out and remove the hurdles of returning to school. In 2015, a bill was introduced to develop an electronic student data profile that followed students from grade to grade and school to school. The bill “*SF990: Digital Student Achievement Backpack Establishment*” (Author: Wiger) was not passed.

Re-engagement Strategies

Research indicates that students who “drop out” of school often return to school after a period of absence and are more aptly referred to as “stop outs” (Barat, Berliner & Fong, 2012). According to Barat et al., students return primarily because of limited employment opportunities and efforts by school leaders or others to facilitate their return. Re-engagement of high school students who have left school (also known as re-entry or dropout recovery) aims to give youth who want to return to school the help they need to graduate and skills to serve them after high school (Rennie-Hill et al., 2014).

Research shows that out-of-school youth frequently want to return to school and continue their education, but do not have the knowledge or means to do so (Hurst, 2004). Studies have demonstrated the positive impact of re-engagement programs on academic, employment, health and social emotional outcomes of diverse populations including economically disadvantaged youth (Moore, 2016). To best serve the needs of these students, re-engagement programs offer a multi-dimensional approach to assist youth in meeting desired outcomes such as a high school diploma, occupational certificate, postsecondary preparation, physical and mental wellness, and more. Coordinating the return to school and/or engaging them in another pathway requires collaboration between multiple partners including school districts and community organizations. The key is to reduce barriers, create individualized and supportive learning experiences, and employ effective strategies to meet individual needs. Further, because of previous negative school experiences in traditional schools, research recommends offering alternative programming such as evening courses, self-paced learning (e.g., online learning), partnerships with post-secondary institutions, earning credit for work experience, and flexible scheduling (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Civic Enterprises & Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2006; The Konopka Institute, 2009).

Effective re-engagement strategies suggest it is critical to “get directly in front of young people” (physically or virtually) who have left school, build trust and strong relationships and present them with viable school options and a supportive process that helps them re-engage (Dobo & Horstman, 2016). Best practice (Fejeran, 2016) suggests the process should include 1) establishing contact through targeted outreach to youth (Dobo & Horstman, 2016), 2) assessing academic status and nonacademic needs, 3) developing an Individual Service Strategy (ISS), 4) identifying good-fit education options, 5) identifying good-fit work/career options to obtain employment, 6) identifying other services based on needs identified in assessment (e.g., chemical or mental health services), and 7) providing ongoing support for at least one year after enrollment via a Re-Engagement Specialist or partner. The book, *Reengagement: Bringing Students Back to America’s Schools* (Moore, 2016) includes extensive information on techniques, emerging and promising practices on the topic of recovery and reengagement of disconnected youth.

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