**BUILDING EFFECTIVE DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS—
SOME PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FROM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

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During the past two decades, high school completion rates for students with disabilities have increased significantly. While this represents an improvement over past rates, dropout rates among students with disabilities remain a national concern. According to data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, more than one-fourth of youth with disabilities still leave high school each year without finishing.

Since 2004, the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) has synthesized available research and practice in the area of dropout prevention for students with disabilities. Our efforts have yielded insights into why youth with disabilities drop out, the consequences faced by these youth, and effective prevention strategies. In this article, we share with you some of the key strategies and recommendations gleaned from research and practice. These strategies and recommendations can be used by state or local administrators as well as educators to guide the development of dropout prevention programs for students with disabilities.

About Causes—Students drop out of school for a variety of reasons. Understanding the factors that contribute to dropout helps ensure the development of effective dropout prevention programs and strategies. Several major causes that are amenable to improvement by educators are listed next.

- Problem behaviors coupled with academic difficulties or prior academic failures are key risk factors that are predictive of school dropout.

- The repeated use of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension, has been identified as one of the major factors contributing to dropout. Exclusion from class due to disciplinary action also leads to lost instructional time and increased academic difficulties.

- Academic progress and school completion are not equally distributed across disability, income, or ethnicity. Almost half of youth with emotional disturbances drop out. Youth with disabilities from low-income households continue to experience high dropout rates, and Hispanic youth have experienced the smallest improvement in school completion over time.

- High absenteeism and being held back a grade are serious risk factors for dropping out that can be monitored by schools.

- Feelings of isolation and alienation often lead to social and psychological disengagement that result in school dropout.

About Consequences— Early school departure is a prominent national issue. Dropping out of school presents a serious national, state, and local concern for all citizens. As a result, school completion has become a high-stakes issue for schools and school districts. The consequences of not finishing high school are serious and costly to both society and the individual student. Simply put, drop out costs and the costs are high. Furthermore, students with disabilities are twice as likely to drop out as compared to their non-disabled peers. Moreover, these youth are placed at increased risk for negative post-school outcomes, including postsecondary education, employment, and independent living and are specifically faced with the following negative consequences.

- Dropouts have fewer options for postsecondary education than do students who remain in school. Additionally, only a few dropouts complete a GED within two years of leaving high school.

- Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed or employed in low-skilled, lower-paying positions. While initial earnings may be comparable between dropouts and graduates, dropouts tend to work more jobs and earn less per hour than graduates. Dropouts also experience a "ceiling effect" in earning power much sooner than graduates.

- Dropouts are more likely to commit crimes as compared to students who complete school. Three to five years after dropping out, the cumulative arrest rate for youth with SED is 73%.

- Dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to need the support of living with parents in early adulthood, experience health problems, engage in criminal activities, and become dependent on welfare and other government programs.

About Prevention— Understanding the variables associated with dropping out and addressing these variables early and systemically will support students who are faced with the decision of leaving school early and lead to decreased dropout rates. A synthesis of research and program evaluation of dropout prevention programs has identified several critical features of programs with positive results. The list below identifies several critical steps that have yielded promising results. This list is not intended to be exhaustive.

- **Establish a leadership team to actively coordinate implementation of dropout prevention efforts.** The task of school leadership is to create and sustain conditions that enable all students and teachers to reach the higher learning standards. As related to dropout prevention, these efforts include adequate funding, professional development and training in effective practices, on-going evaluation, and planned sustainability of efforts. Members of this team should include individuals whose roles, responsibilities, and activities are associated with the development of programs and practices to improve academics and attendance, prevent the development and occurrence of problem behavior, foster family engagement, and manage and evaluate resources related to school improvement.

- **Establish systems for routine monitoring of risk indicators associated with dropout.** These indicators including graduation rates, dropout rates,

attendance rates, office referrals for disciplinary actions, academic performance, and successful progression from grade to grade.

- **Create a local action team to analyze data and address dropout prevention at the local level.** In addition to school personnel, this team should include parents and members from the community.

- **Intervene early, often as early as preschool.** High school is too late to begin dropout prevention, especially for youth in urban schools. Invest in improvements in early childhood education (emphasize reading, math, and prosocial behavior).

- **Increase family engagement and school involvement**. Involve parents consistently and persistently. Parents exert a powerful influence over whether their adolescent children with disabilities complete high school. The most accurate predictor of a student's school achievement is the extent to which his/her family encourages learning. Higher rates of school completion are associated with parents' expectations that children will go on to postsecondary school and greater family involvement at school.

- **Create school environments that are inviting, safe, and supportive**. Safe and inviting environments facilitate learning and increase school attendance. Provide enhancements that increase school-wide social competence and positive behavioral supports.

- **Help students to address problems that interfere with learning**. Provide or assist students in obtaining social, health, and other personal resources they will need to overcome obstacles to their learning and meet their emergent basic needs.

- **Use proven practices**. There are evidence-based practices that can be used to address dropout and the factors associated with dropping out. Implement strategies that promote academic success, promote prosocial behavior, and increase student engagement. Personalize programs as needed to address individual student needs and improve post-school outcomes.

- **Listen to students**. Students want teachers who care about them and their future. Students want you to hear what they have to say. Students can tell you a lot about strategies and practices that will make school more relevant to them and decrease their desire to exit early.

- **Provide relevance and rigor in the academic experience**. Provide opportunities for students to apply their learning in relevant, real world situations and help them see the connections to their own futures as productive and successful citizens within the community.

- **Help students build relationships at school**. Students want to build positive relationships with peers and teachers. However, for students with disabilities, assistance is often needed, especially for students with emotional/behavioral disorders. Teachers who maintain a comfortable and welcoming classroom environment can often foster opportunities for positive interactions. Teachers may also enhance personal relationships [with caring adults] through organizational structures that provide time and formal

opportunities. These relationships and connections enhance students' connection with school and facilitate successful school performance and completion.

- **Focus on effective instruction**. Student performance is enhanced when teachers use instructional time efficiently, while providing multiple means of engagement. Create and implement systemic improvement activities that focus efforts on changing teaching and learning practices. These should promote academic engagement that leads to academic success and the acquisition of useful employment skills.

About Capacity Building—There is no quick fix that will end dropout. Effective dropout prevention cannot occur in a vacuum, but must be carefully viewed within the context of major school reform activity. It must be created within a system that provides an infrastructure for ongoing implementation and sustainability of proven practices and vested by school leaders who lead the charge for the adoption and implementation of data-based decision making and use of evidence-based strategies. The list below identifies several critical steps that have yielded promising results.

- **Take a systemic approach to address dropout prevention**. Steps taken by state and local education agencies to decrease dropout include (a) collection, analysis, and public reporting of *dropout* rates and related information for all secondary schools; (b) conducting causal analyses and needs assessments to identify causes and target resources; (c) providing information and technical assistance on *dropout prevention* strategies to school administrators; (d) providing training, funding, and support for local *dropout prevention* efforts; (e) reviewing and revising relevant policies (attendance, behavior, credit accrual, exit examinations, professional development) that impact school completion; and (f) collecting post-school outcomes data from youth including interviewing *dropouts* to find out why they left school.

- **Conduct causal analysis**. Reaching consensus on cause(s) of dropout within the schools, particularly as related to school factors such as teacher attitudes and behavior, grading and discipline practices, quality of instruction, and teacher turnover creates a foundation for effective problem-solving around dropout prevention.

- **Use data to guide program development, professional development, and other school improvement efforts**. States and local education agencies (LEAs) have a significant amount of data on factors related to school dropout among youth with disabilities. These data should be used for more than reporting purposes.

- **Consider multiple levels of implementation**. One size may not fit all. Effective dropout prevention can occur at any or all of the following three levels within a school. **Universal-**primary prevention: includes all youth and is of low cost per individual (e.g., systemic positive discipline program, enhanced elementary curriculum, tutoring and mentoring programs). **Selected-**prevention/intervention: includes students who are identified as being at risk of dropout and is of moderate cost (e.g., programs that work to build specific skills such as problem-solving, self-maintenance, learning

strategies). **Indicated-**intervention: includes youth exhibiting clear signs of early school leaving, high need, and high cost, and may include intensive wrap-around services.

- **Examine the influence of other performance indicators on school completion.** Look across indicators (dropout, graduation, secondary transition services, behavior, and post-school outcomes data) to get a better picture of how indicators influence each other and impact school completion. Use these clustered results to target improvement strategies that address multiple indicators and leverage resources.

Effective dropout prevention strategies exist as part of systemic reform to improve academic performance, behavior competence, and cultural climate and to increase professional competencies, not as isolated projects or tasks. Furthermore, school completion encompasses a broader view than simply preventing school dropout. Rather, school completion focuses on enhancing students' connection with school, through in-school experiences that are relevant, engaging, challenging, and supportive. In doing so, students see school completion as their desired option.

Additional Resources

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