



**Dropout  
Prevention  
Planning**

*15 Effective Strategies of the  
National Dropout Prevention  
Center/Network as a Model for  
Plan Development*

**A TECHNICAL  
ASSISTANCE DOCUMENT**

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## THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The school dropout problem has reached epidemic levels across the United States as schools and states grapple with this issue that bears grave social and financial consequences at current levels. Each year, in excess of half a million students will leave high school, and the rate at which they leave school has remained at a consistent level for the past 30 years, despite increases in funding for education over that period of time (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2007; Warren and Halpern-Manners, 2007).

In its report, *Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*, by Nancy Martin and Samuel Halperin, the American Youth Policy Forum cites some dubious statistics on the dropout crisis:

- Every nine seconds in America, a student becomes a dropout. (Lehr, C.A., et. al. 2004)
- An estimated 3.8 million youths, ages 18–24 are neither employed nor in school—15% of all young adults. From 2000 to 2004, the ranks of disconnected young adults grew by 700,000. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004)
- From 1990 to 2000, high school completion rates declined in all but seven states, and the rate of students dropping out between 9th and 10th grades increased. (Barton, P.E., 2005)

Who are these students who fail to complete high school? Research indicates that members of certain demographic groups run a much higher risk of dropping out of school. (Orfield, G., Losen, D.J., Wald, J., & Swanson, C.B., 2004)

- Across the nation, about 2/3 of all students who enter 9th grade graduate with regular high school diplomas four years later.
- In 2001, on average, 72% of female students exceeded the 64% of male students who graduated.
- African-American students had a graduation rate of 50%, the lowest of all racial and ethnic groups identified.
- Latino students graduated at a rate of 53%.
- American Indian students at a rate of 51%.

- In school year 2000–2001, high school students from the lowest income families (lowest 20%) dropped out of school at six times the rate of their peers from higher-income families. (U.S. Department of Education, 2004)
- Also in school year 2000–2001, only 47.6% of students with disabilities ages 14 and older graduated with standard diplomas, while 41.1% dropped out of school. (U.S. Department of Education, 2003)

As a result, American Society faces multiple negative consequences:

- Three quarters of state prison inmates are dropouts, as are 59% of federal inmates. (Harlow, C.W. (2003)
- Dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be incarcerated in their lifetimes. (Catterall, J.S. 1985)
- 90% of the 11,000 youth in adult detention facilities have no more than a 9th grade education. (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001)
- The earning power of dropouts has been in a constant decline over the past three decades.
- The mean earnings of Latino young adults who finish high school are 43% higher than those who drop out. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002)
- Dropouts are substantially more likely to rely on public assistance than those individuals who have graduated from high school. The estimated lifetime revenue loss for male dropouts ages 25–34 is \$944 billion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003). The cost to the public of their crime and welfare benefits is estimated to be \$24 billion annually. (Adair, C.V., 2001)
- Students who drop out of school “cost our nation more than \$260 billion...That’s in lost wages, lost taxes, and lost productivity over their lifetimes.” (Spellings, M. testimony, Sept. 29, 2005)

The scope of the problem is national, and it has been resistant to change. Reviewing the literature and resources available to address this issue finds that efforts to address the dropout problem must be systemic in nature. The greatest success in efforts to reduce dropout rates has included multiple approaches as part of a comprehensive strategy to increase student engagement. (Dynarski, M., Clarke, et al., 2008) The good news in all of this is that a great deal of energy and professional resources are being devoted to this issue, and guidance for schools and communities seeking to address the dropout problem is extensive. In this era of school improvement planning, districts should consider a comprehensive plan to address dropout prevention and improving

graduation rates as their improvement planning paradigm. In effect, increasing graduation rates and reducing dropout rates are characterized by higher levels of student engagement, both academically and socially throughout their school experience. Viewing any school improvement effort as a dropout prevention effort is far from misguided.



## **WHERE TO BEGIN? BUILDING A DISTRICT-WIDE DROPOUT PREVENTION PLAN**

Given that efforts to address dropout prevention will require a comprehensive, district-wide plan, what sort of frameworks exists to assess what a district is doing, and how should a district identify those areas of strategic need in the development of a long-term plan for improving graduation rates?

The **National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N)** at Clemson University exists to help schools and communities address the issue of dropout prevention and improving graduation rates. Given this mission, the Center has conducted and analyzed research since 1986 and developed **15 Effective Strategies** that are multidimensional and systemically address the dropout crisis. While created to address the dropout problem, these strategies also address truancy issues, and while they may be implemented as singular strategies, the most positive outcomes will emerge when a district develops a program that uses most, if not all, of the strategies.

(Smink & Reimer, 2005)

The strategies are organized into four general categories: **School and Community Perspective, Early Interventions, Basic Core Strategies, and Making the Most of Instruction**. A comprehensive review of the Effective Strategies can be found in the research report, *Fifteen Effective Strategies for Improving Student Attendance and Truancy Prevention*, published by the NDPC/N.



# SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

Schools do not exist in isolation. Effective schools exist as integral parts of their communities and enjoy strong business and community support. Attendance and truancy issues, both of which are known predictors of dropping out of school, are community problems. Therefore, to address these issues as well as set the stage for a comprehensive dropout prevention program, there are three critical strategies that serve as a baseline for others:

- **Systemic Renewal**
- **School and Community Collaboration**
- **Safe Learning Environments**

## 1. Systemic Renewal

Systemic renewal can be described as a continuing process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures and the impact they have on a diverse group of learners. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

Schools must look to change the way they are structured and intensify relationships between students and teachers (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Research has identified that a student's attitude toward school is the single most important factor in combating truancy; schools must be places where students want to attend rather than have to attend. (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997)

Systemic renewal is a cornerstone concept in the development of an effective dropout prevention plan.

## 2. School and Community Collaboration

Community groups that provide collective support to the school create an infrastructure able to sustain a caring environment in which youth can thrive and achieve. (Smink &

Reimer, 2005) It is in the best interest of the community to work with the school to address truancy issues as truancy inherently costs businesses that must work to train uneducated workers and taxpayers who must pay higher taxes for law enforcement and welfare costs for dropouts who are either unemployed or underemployed. (Garry, 1996)

### **3. Safe Learning Environments**

School-wide behavioral initiatives that address violence prevention and conflict resolution promote a safe learning environment, constructed on daily experiences at all grade levels that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all of the student population. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

“A school’s learning atmosphere or climate and discipline policies have an effect on school attachment among students. When a student feels an attachment to school through a web of relationships with other students, teachers, or a caring adult, it can help overcome many of the causes of truancy.” (Heilbrunn & Seeley, 2003)

Bullying prevention programs and other school-wide initiatives to promote positive behaviors and social attitudes are an important ingredient in fostering positive student attachment to school.





# EARLY INTERVENTIONS

Research has identified that early identification of poor attendance patterns and the truancy problems that follow is vital to ensuring a successful school experience. These patterns usually develop in the elementary grades and, when addressed early, enjoy a more positive prognosis for change. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

Early Interventions include the following three strategies:

- **Family Engagement**
- **Early Childhood Education**
- **Early Literacy Development**

## 1. Family Engagement

Research consistently demonstrates that when a family is engaged in a student's education, there is a positive effect on achievement, and family engagement is one of the most accurate predictors of a student's success in school. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

Schools with effective dropout prevention programs are reaching out to parents, seeking to understand the underlying causes of truancy and encouraging specific family involvement in the education of their children.

## 2. Early Childhood Education

Birth-to-five interventions demonstrate that providing a child with additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who ultimately drop out of school is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of the school experience through primary grades. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)



### **3. Early Literacy Development**

Early interventions to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills establish the necessary foundation for effective learning of all subjects (Smink and Reimer, 2005). Improving students' basic skills allows them to be more successful and fosters a more positive attachment to school.



## **BASIC CORE STRATEGIES**

The following four strategies have had an impact on all levels, but they have been managed more easily in middle and high school settings. Basic core strategies are student-centered strategies that provide dynamic and meaningful learning opportunities in a variety of settings, keeping students on a path toward graduation.

(Smink & Reimer, 2005)

The 4 Basic Core Strategies include these:

- **Mentoring/Tutoring**
- **Service Learning**
- **Alternative Schooling**
- **After-school Opportunities**

#### **1. Mentoring/Tutoring**

Mentoring is defined as a one-to-one, caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. (Smink and Reimer, 2005) Tutoring, which is also a one-to-one activity, has its focus on academics and is an effective practice for addressing specific needs such as basic skill development. (Smink and Reimer, 2005)

#### **2. Service Learning**

Service learning seeks to connect meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. It is an effective means of promoting personal and social growth,

career development, and civic responsibility and can be a powerful vehicle for school reform at all levels. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

“Studies of the effects of service-learning on grades, attendance, and dropout reduction indicate the value of this strategy for students who have significant risk factors.”  
(Shumer & Druckenfield, 2004)

### **3. Alternative Schooling**

Alternative schooling provides at-risk students with a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs that pay special focus to an individual’s social and academic needs. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

“Graduates of alternative schools report that alternative school experiences made all the difference in helping them to become productive citizens.” (Morley, 2002)

### **4. After-school Opportunities**

After-school opportunities are designed to provide students with programs that help diminish information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Summer programs and after school sports or other programs provide students with opportunities for socialization while engaging in constructive activities. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

“Well-designed and effectively implemented after-school programs add to the chances that at-risk students will stay out of trouble, stay in school, and stay engaged with their education.” (Peterson & Fox, 2004)



# MAKING THE MOST OF INSTRUCTION

We all know that what happens in the classroom is at the heart of keeping kids in school. Strategies that address the different learning styles of students increase the knowledge and skills of teachers, and harness the power of technology can increase learning and attendance. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

The following school-based interventions have proven effective with students who are in at-risk situations:

- **Professional Development**
- **Active Learning**
- **Educational Technology**
- **Individualized Instruction**
- **Career and Technical Education (CTE)**

## **1. 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 and techniques and learn about innovative strategies. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

“Low achieving students increased their achievement level by as much as 53% when taught by a highly effective teacher.” (Haycock, 1998)

## **2. Active 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 there are different ways to learn. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

Active learning focuses on student engagement and success in the classroom, thereby fostering a more positive perception of school and making school more of a place where a student wants to be.

### **3. Educational Technology**

The vast variety of educational technology available today offers some of the best opportunities for engaging students in authentic learning, addressing multiple intelligences, and adapting to students' learning styles. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

### **4. Individualized Instruction**

Each student possesses unique interests and past learning experiences. An individualized instructional program for each student allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies to consider such individual differences. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

“Dropout statistics show that numerous so-called normal students are not succeeding because they are not treated as individuals.” (Stainback & Stainback, 1992)

“Indeed, research strongly suggests that schools which have created smaller and/or personalized learning environments have higher attendance and lower dropout rates.” (Railsback, 2004)

### **5. Career and Technical Education (CTE)**

A quality CTE program and a related guidance program are essential for all students. School-to-work programs recognize that youth need specific skills to prepare them to measure up to the increased demands of today's workplace. (Smink & Reimer, 2005)

Not all students will be college bound. Schools must take it upon themselves to provide an educational experience that assesses a student's career options and provides the necessary training, vocational and otherwise, to pursue those options.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Dropout Problem is a complex and costly issue for schools and society to address. But clearly, this is how it must be done. The school is a centerpiece of a community, providing valuable trained workers for its businesses, students who go on to higher education and professional careers, and responsible citizens who value service to their community. Students who dropout represent a cost to a society in higher taxes for services to meet their needs. It is in everyone's best interest to collaborate to address this problem, and indeed, therein lies the greatest chance for success.

The Fifteen Effective Strategies of NDPC/N provide a framework for conceptualizing the task of building a comprehensive Dropout Prevention Plan—a template to assess what is currently being done as well as to identify those areas in need of attention. Given that the most positive outcomes result from implementation of a greater number of the strategies (Smink & Reimer, 2005), it is recommended that the district assess its status in each of the strategy areas.

A template can be constructed that allows a team or teams of district staff to consider each of the strategy areas, how they are defined, and what the district is currently doing that would represent an implementation in that area. The following is an example:

### **Basic Core Strategies: Currently Implemented**

#### ***Mentoring/Tutoring:***

- Volunteer Program provides tutoring support to elementary literacy efforts.
- Cross-age tutoring program where MS/HS students work with younger students
- Community group provides mentors for at-risk HS students in career areas.

### ***Service Learning***

- Elementary/MS students assist with community clean-up efforts.
- HS students volunteer time for elderly and the disabled.

### ***Alternative Schooling***

- HS Alternative Program
- MS Saturday school

### ***After-school Opportunities***

- Summer Enrichment Programs for at-risk students
- HS Credit Recovery
- Vocational credit after school
- Boys' and Girls' club on campus

Districts can then evaluate whether certain strategy areas are in need of strengthening as well as how the implemented strategies are impacting students through a review of data commonly collected for all students, looking for individual and district-wide impacts. For example, a few of the many items that a district may consider could include the following:

- Attendance data from across the district; at-risk individuals
- Discipline referrals
- Attendance data of students participating in service learning projects
- Number of elementary students receiving tutoring support/ student attendance

Risk factors associated with dropping out of school must be assessed across grade levels. Focused interventions may be the result of analysis of this data. Inclusion in strategy programs available in district could be prescribed for students with high risk factors. An excellent resource for a consideration of risk factors of dropping out may be found through the website of the **National Dropout Prevention Center/Network**, entitled *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs*, Hammond, Linton, Smink and Drew, (2007).

An additional resource for conducting a self-assessment for dropout prevention planning as well as providing examples of effective, reliable, field-tested, research-based and data driven practices in each of the Fifteen Effective strategies, may be found in *Best Practices to Help At-Risk Learners*, Schargel, F. P. (2005). Eye on Education: Larchmont, NY.

## **ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

*Research Report: Fifteen Effective Strategies for Improving Student Attendance and Truancy Prevention*, Smink, J. & Reimer, M.S. (2005) National Dropout Prevention Center/Network; available through the NDPC/N website ([www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org))

Provides an overview of the Fifteen Strategies, publications, websites supporting the strategy, and model programs in each strategy area.

*Strategies to Help Solve Our School Dropout Problem*, Schargel, F.P. & Smink, J. (2001). Eye on Education, Larchmont, NY.

Provides information defining strategy areas as well as effective activities for implementation in each strategy area, as well as resource and contact information for model programs.

**The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network** is a membership organization committed to meeting the needs of at-risk by reshaping school and community environments. Located at Clemson University, the website is an excellent source of publications and other resources for districts.

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