

**National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)**  
**“The Impact of Policies and Procedures**  
**on Dropout and School Completion”**  
**Dr. Loujeania Williams Bost & Dr. Matthew Klare**  
**October 16, 2007**

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Dr. Matthew Klare: Actually, before I launch into it, Dick, do you think we could get the third call-in question about does your school have an existing dropout prevention initiative?

Dick: Yes, we certainly can. The next question we would like the audience to answer, again, using your telephone keypad, does your district or school have an existing dropout prevention initiative that specifically includes students with disabilities? Press 1 for no; 2 for yes, and 3 if you do not know.

Again, does your district or school have an existing dropout prevention initiative that specifically includes students with disabilities? 1 for no; 2 for yes, and press 3 on your telephone keypad if you do not know. You can go ahead and do that now.

While these numbers are coming in, I'll turn it back to you.

Dr. Matthew Klare: Thanks, Dick, that's great.

I want to address some of the school exiting policies. The goal, basically, of having school exiting policies is to provide some conditions and requirements by which students exit school. And exiting categories include graduating, dropping out, death, or if the student moved to another district or school, or was transferred out.

The link of these things to drop out, is that 1 in 3 kids with disabilities will not graduate on time with a regular diploma. We got that information from [www.ideadata.org](http://www.ideadata.org).

The National Longitudinal Transition Study, the Version II, Part II, suggests that 28 percent of students with disabilities who left school, did so by dropping out.

Some graduation requirements: On average, states require about 20 course credits for students to earn a high school diploma. Twenty-four states offer advanced recognition to kids who exceed standard graduation requirements. But only 8 of those states actually provide advanced recognition for students in a career or technical field. So, there's some disparity there.

Twenty-two states now require students to pass an exit exam of some sort, to earn a diploma. In 18 of those states, the exams are based on standards at the tenth grade level or higher.

Sixteen of the exit exam states also offer an appeals process or some sort of alternative route that children can use to get a diploma when they fail the assessments.

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---

Some information about diploma options: The overall goal of offering multiple diplomas is to provide programs of studies that are tailored to the goals, the needs and the capabilities of students. Obviously, there are some states which offer only one diploma, and others which offer multiple diplomas. So, one of the issues, we found, is that in many states, recipients of an alternative diploma are not considered true graduates. They're completers but not real graduates and, therefore, not counted when the state tallies up its graduation count.

Some information about diploma options—some of the positive aspects: If multiple diplomas are offered, all are considered graduating. That's definitely a positive aspect. Diplomas offered supports students' needs, their interests, and their goals. An example would be, IEP students can actually obtain a real, regular diploma.

Some of the negative aspects of diploma options are that, in some states, IEP students can only receive certificates, and they're not considered true graduates.

Other problems we have encountered, in some states, students enrolled in GED Programs are always considered dropouts. In other states though, we found that if the student transfers out of school and into the GED Program, he or she is not considered a dropout. They'll get their GED and will be considered a completer, but they're not considered dropouts. So, it varies from state to state.

Some of the exiting-related policies we found, in terms of negatives, as Loujeania mentioned, compulsory attendance. Another thing we found is that having a four-year limitation for graduating with a standard diploma confounds a lot of children, particularly, students with disabilities, because they're in school for more than four years. And even kids without disabilities are often ending up taking more than four standard years to graduate, because, in some states, and some local districts and schools, graduation requirements are a little bit higher. They may require 24 or 26 credits, and the kids simply can't jam them all into four years.

We found that lack of policies and procedures that help schools and districts document and track students who transfer or have withdrawn, moved to another district, that the lack of policies causes a problem in that schools can't keep track of where these children have gone. And I'll talk a little bit more about that later.

Another negative aspect of school exiting policies is that students with disabilities often aren't counseled—students, in general, are not often counseled before they withdraw. They, basically, either disappear, or simply said, “Okay, goodbye, thank you for coming, and good luck.”

Some of the positive policies and positive things we found are changing the compulsory age of attendance from age 16 to 18, letting kids have more time to complete course work toward a standard diploma, extending it, for example, from 4 years to 5 years, or maybe 6 years.

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Increasing accountability: We're tracking students within and across districts as they move, as their parents move.

And, finally, data based decision-making systems, longitudinal databases that will let students be tracked, be followed, as they move among districts, or among schools within a district.

Dick: Excuse me, Matt, we have the results of that polling question, and we are evenly divided. One-third said no, their district does not have an existing dropout prevention initiative. That specifically includes students with disabilities. One-third said yes, and one-third did not know the answer.

Dr. Matthew Klare: Hm, interesting! Thank you.

We actually have another question we'd like to ask, which is related to the attendance policy. Dick, do you want to do that fourth one?

Dick: All right. Certainly.

The fourth question: Does your school's attendance policy carry both rewards and sanctions? Press 1 for no; 2 for yes, and 3 if you do not know.

Does your school's attendance policy carry both rewards and sanctions? And you can go ahead and respond to that now.

And, Matt, I'm going to turn it back to you while those results come in.

Dr. Matthew Klare: Thanks, Dick, that's great.

In terms of school completion policies, dropout and graduation—some of the positive things we found: If a school has a school completion initiative, and it specifically includes students with disabilities, that's very good.

For a state to have clear definitions of who is a dropout, and who is a graduate, truly helps as well. It makes everyone aware of exactly what they're going to receive when they get out of high school. It, basically, keeps everyone informed of what the state means when they say a "graduate" or a "dropout."

We found some states require parental or a guardian's signature and permission as well as that of a judge to withdraw, if the child is under 17 years old. And if the child just, basically, disappears from school, he or she is at risk of losing their driver's license, and/or their work permit.

Dick: And, Matt, I have the results of that question. Evenly divided, 50 percent said yes, and 50 percent aren't sure.

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Dr. Matthew Klare: Interesting! Thank you very much.

Some of the negative aspects of dropout and school completion policies: Very often, students with disabilities and IEP students don't get a standard diploma when they graduate. And kids who take more than the regular four years are not considered true graduates.

Something that's very significant in terms of keeping track of children and knowing the true dropout rate is the transference of records and the procedures that are used when records are transferred from one school to another, or one district to another. It's essential to be sure that there's a consistent way that a child is registered and that a child is withdrawn, and that those procedures, those steps are followed exactly each time.

One way to ensure that this is actually done is to write fairly short, bulleted or numbered lists so the exact same procedure is followed each time. That way, if you have someone filling in for the person who usually does that registration or withdrawal, that person—that new person, or temporary person doesn't try to reinvent the wheel, and miss some of the information, or skip a couple of steps, thereby, losing the child's records.

When the kids fall through the cracks, basically, they will be counted as dropouts. So, it's very important that we are able to track kids and know where they've gone to.

All right. I want to move in, and give you some of the policies and procedures that we've encountered in the states and districts as we've traveled around the country, as well as some of the stuff we've found in the literature.

At a governmental level, some strategies we've encountered are those which give children more than four years to complete their high school education. This is particularly important, as we said earlier, for students with disabilities, and for English language learners, kids who are not fluent in English.

Another good policy or trend we found is that kids with IEPs are able to be counted as graduates. They're truly considered in the graduation count.

Another strategy we've encountered at the state level is increasing the age of compulsory school attendance from 16 or 17 up to 18. It keeps the kids in school longer. It keeps them exposed to educational opportunities and to transition opportunities that will help them succeed in their later lives.

Another good thing we've seen in some schools and districts is changing the withdrawal process where you actually conduct an exit interview before the student leaves. And this process often includes family counseling, some academic counseling, maybe some vocational counseling, referral to appropriate services and agencies as well.

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This exit interview should also be a venue in which to collect post-school outcome information. Obviously, after a school loses a child to graduation or to dropping out, they will need to contact that student a year later to figure out where he or she is, and whether he or she is gainfully employed. That's one opportunity to collect that contact information.

Other strategies we found at the state level is pulling a kid's driver's license or work permit, if they drop out without parental permission, and the permission of a principal or a judge.

For chronic absenteeism, if a child misses more than 'N' days of school, a certain number of days of school, this would cause the loss of their license or their work permit.

Wisconsin's got a program called "Learn Fair," which, basically, makes welfare support contingent upon the kids staying in school and attending school, and succeeding in school.

In order to effect changes in policies and procedures at the federal and state level, it's necessary to meet with stakeholders, achieve a consensus on what's really needed, what has to be revised or reviewed, and changed, and how to actually accomplish that goal.

We should include students, teachers, teachers' union, superintendents, principals, the community members, business and industry, legislators, and any other relevant stakeholders in this discussion process. Basically, then need to propose legislation to support dropout prevention, school completion. And, finally, we need public buy-in, public consensus on whether that's going to be an acceptable way to proceed.

At a local level things that we've seen that worked—providing flexibility in school programs, help students with disabilities stay in school, allow students to engage in some sort of relevant learning by enrolling in a four-year, or in a community or technical college, while they're meaningfully employed. Basically, let them go to school and work, concurrently, make some money, get some experience, and get credit toward their graduation.

Another good thing to do is to start a credit recovery program for kids who have missed some classes, have not attained the correct or desired number of credits that they'll need to graduate. Instead of retaining a child in elementary school, rather than just retaining them and dooming them to fail year after year, providing early intervention services, intense remediation, will often help that child succeed.

As Loujeania said earlier, retaining a student often begins their path to dropout.

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---

Another thing she discussed earlier, the twilight school, for example, changing the starting hour for high schools by opening a little later in the morning, and staying a little later in the evening is a way of keeping kids in school.

Other proposed strategies we've seen at the local level, developing Reading and Math labs where struggling kids can keep from falling behind in their courses, also providing testing labs, where kids who need accommodations and modifications can go and take their assessments.

Reviewing disciplinary policies, particularly those which address expulsions, suspension, is very good. Trying to make expulsion a very rare event, and rather than doing that, offer in school suspension, in school alternatives to out of school suspension will help keep kids in school.

Having a school-wide behavior, a PBS sort of program, in the middle schools as well as in the high schools is a good strategy we found.

Finally, examining feeder school patterns in areas of high dropout is very important. See what the middle schools are doing and if particular middle schools are the source of a lot of dropouts, try to get into those middle schools, identify what's going on there, and address whatever issues are causing kids from those schools to drop out when they get into high school.

Another thing we found is that some schools, some districts, have standardized their grading systems so that an A or a B in one school means the same thing as that in the next school or other schools within the district. That way when children transfer among schools in a district, or from district to district, they don't have to go through the process of saying how many credits they really have in their new school as compared to their old school.

It's important, too, to improve curriculum and instruction so all kids receive the same high quality learning opportunities, and to provide wrap-around services, access to various agencies and services is very important because academics aren't the only reason that kids leave school. Basically, we need to make sure that we provide all of the services that they will need to succeed in school, and to succeed in life.

Other proposed strategies we've seen at the local level are developing attendance policies with an intention to change kids' behavior rather than to punish them for what they've done. So, change the way they feel about school, change the way they stay in school. Make them want to go to school and be in school, rather than simply punishing them for not going to school.

Finally, listening to what kids say is very important. Kids know what they want out of school. They will tell you if you ask them. So, it's important to listen to what they have to say, and listen to what they want out of school and out of their school experience.

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When you go about trying to effect change at a local level, obviously, you need to talk about the problem. You need to invite all the stakeholders to the table. Get everyone involved in the discussion, and try to reach a consensus about what needs to be done.

You need to examine what data you have about school completion. Look at what you know about dropout rates, about graduation rates, about attendance. Bring all of the data you have to bear on whatever issue it is, and see how that should affect your policies and your procedures at a local level.

Ask questions. Seek promising practices. Don't just go by the book. See if there are outside-the-box types of solutions that will actually address your needs.

And, finally, connect to the full spectrum of the K through 16 education system.

When we're done today, when you go back to your schools, to your districts, there are a few things that you can do in terms of policies and procedures. Review and, as needed, try to revise your district or your school's dropout related policies and procedures. Look at your attendance policy. Look at your discipline policies, how you do suspension, expulsion, office referrals. Look at your curriculum, and academic issues, whether your curriculum is matched to the state standards, whether it's actually addressing all of the needs of all of your children, including students with disabilities. Look at your policies on grade retention, whether you offer early interventions, whether you provide remediation rather than just retaining a child, and saying, "Good luck next year." What do you do about it? Do you actually support the children?

Look at your policies on school completion. Who is a dropout? Who is a graduate? What constitutes dropping out? What will—like how many days do you have to be absent before you are thrown out of school and become a dropout that way? Look at all those things that could potentially push children out of school.

Look at your diploma options as well. Do you offer one diploma, or multiple diplomas? Do those meet the needs of the kids in your school?

Look at the way records about children are maintained and transferred among schools, and among districts.

And, finally, look at your exit codes, your withdrawal codes. When a child moves, and his or her whereabouts is unknown, they will be considered a dropout. So, it's very crucial to understand and to know where these kids go when they leave your school.

I think that's, basically, what we have today. Loujeaenia?