

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)
**“Engaging Students with School:
The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
Dr. Sandra L. Christenson
January 22, 2008

Operator: At this time I would like to remind everyone in order to ask a question press star then the number 1 on your telephone keypad. We'll pause for just a moment to compile the Q&A roster.

Moderator: Okay, (Sandy) it looks like we do have some web questions. And we will get to those while people are calling in. Our first one is from (Jean Ramirez) and the question is will you explain some time in the presentation the difference between PBIS Check in/Check Out and the Check and Connect program?

(Sandra Christenson): Okay. I'd be happy to. Positive behavioral intervention support is school wide effort to be able to have positive reinforcement, group contingencies and a foundation for directly teaching students about the kinds of behaviors that we want from students.

And then the students who are having more difficulty adopting those can have more small group or individualized work to handle their behavior. Within that behavior education program people have created what they call that check in and check out program where a student may come with a chart and say to their teacher I have my pens and my pencils and all my material.

I'm checking in with you and now I'm going to go back to my desk and I'm going to actually work on that. And then at the end of the school hour and again at the end of school day they'll check out with somebody and they'll be reminded about the kinds of behaviors they hope to see tomorrow in the school.

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Check and Connect is an intervention not unlike positive intervention supports. But I think it is broader in that we are very concerned about looking at the engagement of students from a multidimensional point of view. So we may be working with students who would say I have no perceived competence or I have no perceived connection with anyone in my building.

So we're broader than behavior. Now we also look at behavior but we're broader. And then the mentor works with that student building a relationship, problem solving with that student in order to be able to have that student become connected to the school environment.

So we take a very individualized look at each student's situation with their teachers, with their family and then figure out exactly what intervention should be put in place. Ideally across school/home is very important. Now we don't always achieve that but we would like to be able to have that.

I hope I answered that question.

Moderator: Okay (Sandy), we have another web question. Slide 7 identifies students of ethnicities other than white or Asian as having a higher propensity for dropping out. Could you please speak more directly to the role of race in engagement?

Can you please make explicit connections between cultural responsiveness and relevance?

(Sandra Christenson): When I look at dropout rates I just see where we are looking at very much a static characteristic and we are describing those students that are likely to dropout and we're just categorizing that. So we see who has dropped out and

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we can then say well students who have self identified as African American or Native American or Hispanic, their dropout rates look like this.

Caucasian dropout rates look like this. For me the issue becomes that we want to very much intervene and it's so easy to say, but intervene in a culturally responsible and sensitive way. In that I really want to understand the perspective of the individual.

And race and ethnicity is a very important aspect and a very important variable that I need to understand because I want to understand that individual's perspective, how they feel they're treated in the school, how they feel where they fit in the school, where they don't feel like they fit in the school.

And so our mentors work very hard. But we operate very much with respect to understanding the students' perspective and then also understanding the parents' perspective. So it's very, very important for us to learn from the student as well as the family.

And that would be how I operate with intervention. But I don't think there's any question right now that we know the targeted groups in terms of ethnicity that are still dropping out of our schools at a higher rate than Caucasians.

Moderator: Okay. (Janice) do we have any callers in the queue?

Operator: Yes we do. Your first question is from (Kim Moody).

(Kim Moody): Hi. We're in the (Francis) High School District which is in Metropolitan St. Louis. And we are wondering if your Check and Connect mentors are paid a

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stipend? Do they, are they required to become mentors in their school? How does that work?

(Sandra Christenson): That’s a very important question given that this talk, I was asked to speak on student engagement. I couldn’t focus all the time on Check and Connect. The, our mentors, we have always been a research project at the University of Minnesota so we developed Check and Connect and then we assessed the efficacy of this model and intervention.

And we really have had six applications at this point. And the one in Minneapolis is continuing and has since 1990, but we’re in year seven with Bush funding in all the high schools in Minneapolis. In all cases we hire mentors.

Now it doesn’t mean that in any of those applications we have not had school personnel. But they’ve taken a very small caseload. The majority of our students are mentored by individuals that we hire and we, so they are working for us.

And they are mentoring students, working to build collaborative relationships with the students and the parent. And so the costs on the Check and Connect intervention model have typically been, and this was an elementary estimate, with our elementary students have been somewhere in the, oh right around \$1,375 per student per year.

And so there are costs but our primary cost is that individual who is going to build that relationship and that cost can be offset a bit for schools because the students are not attending, then the school is not getting state, you know state dollars for our students being present at school.

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The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
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January 22, 2008

(Kim Moody): Thank you.

Operator: Your next question is from (Angie Copely).

(Angie Copely): Hi. This is the Northern (unintelligible) Co-op and I have several districts represented here. And one of the questions is you mentioned a survey that you used with the students. Is that something that's publicized or does it come with the Connect, Check and Connect material? Or...

(Sandra Christenson): We have recently, I'm getting a tremendous amount of interference on my phone. Oh, I think it's cleared up. We have recently developed a student engagement instrument. We refer to it as the SEI. It was published here in the year 2006.

Anyone who's interested in that instrument they could e-mail me. I put my e-mail address on one of the slides and I would be happy to send you information with respect to that. We have very good psychometric properties. But that instrument is primarily zeroing in on cognitive engagements and on psychological engagement.

We actually use other indicators for academic and attendance because those, you know we don't have to survey kids about their attendance. We can actually get the data on attendance. But it's very important we, I don't know whether a student feels like they have perceived competence or their perceived relevance to schoolwork or whether they're setting a goal or whether they feel like they belong unless I actually ask the student.

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)
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The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
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January 22, 2008

So we have developed this instrument to fill in on our four subtypes of engagement. And I'd be happy to share the instrument with you. It was actually the doctoral dissertation for a graduate student here at the university who's now in Georgia working at (Aquanec) County Public Schools.

(Angie Copely): Great. Do you know is the material just for like high school or is it middle and high?

(Sandra Christenson): We have measured students at the middle and at the high school level. And we soon will be measuring students at the fourth and fifth grade level with the instrument. It has readability where fourth and fifth graders should be able to understand the items and read the items.

But we have always administered it orally just in order to be able to control for any reading difficulty.

(Angie Copely): Great. Thank you very much. Oh, I'm sorry. SEI stands for, could you repeat what SEI stands for?

(Sandra Christenson): SEI? Student engagement instrument.

(Angie Copely): Okay, thank you.

Operator: Your next question is from (Beth James). Ms. (James), your line is open. If your line is muted please unmute your line and proceed with your question.

(Beth James): Yes. We have a grant that is available for us that we are to use for professional development. And I was just interested in where we should start with our staff.

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)
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The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
Dr. Sandra L. Christenson
January 22, 2008

(Sandra Christenson): In terms of adopting a student engagement framework?

(Beth James): Yes.

(Sandra Christenson): You know I think whenever you take something new on like getting people to think along the lines of student engagement, first I would begin by letting them know what it is, what are the different types, what are indicators of that as well as information about the different kinds of interventions that can line up with the different types.

I have an article I'd be happy to send that to you. I think I gave it actually earlier on when we were planning for this webcast. So I'd be happy to send that to you. But it isn't just content information. I think you're really talking about a systems change and that's part of that school reform issue.

And that book on engaging schools maybe very helpful to you but it's, what is the process, how are we going to support our staff answer their questions and support our staff in order to be able to agree on the kinds of interventions that we want to put in place for this particular school context?

So there are many, many interventions there. And there is a fair amount of overlap. I think you could hear that as I was talking about the different individualized or universal interventions. So people have to select which ones fit their particular staff.

So if you were going to begin some place what I would strongly suggest you do is to systematically monitor population wide, school wide what do your

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The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
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January 22, 2008

average attendance rates look like, your average skip rates, your average tardies?

What do your suspensions look like if kids are being suspended? What do behavioral referrals look like? What do grades look like? What do objectives past, if you have certain tests or reading objectives? But decide to collect some data that's readily available at your school level and to understand which kids are at the average, which are above the average but perhaps which kids are a standard deviation below the average.

These are kids you're going to be very concerned about because they're showing you poor grades, poor attendance. And recall (Dr. Bost) showed that slide at the middle school level with poor attendance and poor English and poor math. These are critically important. We've got those data at all of our schools. So if we did this on a population base you would be able to identify the students you know who are engaged, the students who are only you know right around the average of engagement and then those that are below an engagement.

You'd identify students that you could then think about, okay, how are we going to increase the engagement for these students? And then if you knew something about interventions perhaps you could have a process where the whole school's staff would decide we want to begin with these two things.

And then next year you add a couple more things. You really need to think about this as a three to five year effort.

(Beth James): Thank you.

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**“Engaging Students with School:
The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
Dr. Sandra L. Christenson
January 22, 2008

Operator: Your next question is from (Anne Gowan).

Anne: Yes. Can you tell me or give me some kind of idea, the schools that we have, would the district have a set attendance policy and has that attendance policy helped or had any effect with dropouts?

(Sandra Christenson): My reading of the literature is that if we have a very rigid attendance policy that it actually may work against us. I'm not going to say that it increases dropout rates because I don't know if I totally believe that. There would be multiple reasons why students drop out of school.

But by just having an attendance policy we're doing nothing about trying to connect students to school. We're doing nothing that gives them a reason for wanting to be at school. And I think what you have to do is you really have to say why wouldn't kids want to school?

You have to take the attitude, what can we do at this school building that's going to make kids want to come? How can we build a relationship with disengaged kids? How can we have a group of peers excited about something?

Maybe they weren't excited about it before. So we've got to have programs that kids want to attend. So I strongly encourage you not to think that an attendance policy is going to help you because it's not addressing the important engagement variables.

Attendance is part of it but kids have to have a reason. They have to see the relevance of schoolwork and they have to believe they can be competent in schoolwork.

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)
**“Engaging Students with School:
The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
Dr. Sandra L. Christenson
January 22, 2008

You know it's really very interesting, when kids look at their own self perceived competence they look at their skills and then they look around and say okay, what social resources are out there?

How can my teacher help? How can other peers help me? Because they don't only look at their own skill level. They may know that they're in trouble but they, if they feel that somebody's going to help them then they become more engaged. So I think it's broader than just a rigid attendance policy.

Anne: Thank you.

Operator: Your next question is from (Ken Johnston).

(Ken Johnston): Yes, hi. I'm with the (Franklin Hampshire) Career Center in Northampton, Massachusetts. Can you talk briefly about helping students who have fallen behind academically, older students, to catch up, if there are any type of academic programs out there that they can catch up with school so they graduate with their class?

Because a lot of students I'm seeing are dropping out because they'll be 20 at the time that they graduate.

(Sandra Christenson): You're absolutely right. One of the drawbacks of retention, a big drawback is we retain students in the early grades and then we forget how old they're going to be when they're in high school. And as soon as a student gets overage, overage is clearly a strong predictor of dropping out.

And, but we have those students and we need to provide academic support for those students. I am aware of some programs that are being done at

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)
**“Engaging Students with School:
The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
Dr. Sandra L. Christenson
January 22, 2008

community colleges where students are actually going to community colleges and completing high school work but in a setting that feels more like their age and where they want to be psychologically and emotionally.

I think having off campus kinds of programs, to expect students to be at traditional high schools as a 20 year old with students who are 18, that's a very large age gap.

So we're going to have to look at these other kinds of programs that allow students to obtain the credits and hopefully more than just the credits but actually academic skills as well.

And, so I've been quite intrigued by some of those programs that are looking at their community college setting. Now I recognize not all high schools have community colleges in their setting and so that right, is a challenge. But how could we set up programs outside of the actual traditional high school for those students I think would be very key.

(Ken Johnston): Thank you.

Operator: And there are no further audio questions.

Moderator: Well (Sandy) do you want to take one more web question?

(Sandra Christenson): I'd be happy to.

Moderator: Okay. This one is from (David Riley) and he asks who are the mentors, teachers? Are they paid? Has the research been with urban school districts, minority students?

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)
**“Engaging Students with School:
The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
Dr. Sandra L. Christenson
January 22, 2008

(Sandra Christenson): Okay. Hi (David). Great question. Our mentors are paid. We have had on some of our projects in Minneapolis’ schools, both of them the first project that we, when we began in 1990 to 1995 and then the project that spans from 1990 to excuse me, year 2000 to 2005.

And both those articles are published if anybody is interested in reading about those studies. We did have some staff in the Minneapolis schools who took on a small caseload. But it’s very, very small. That typically we have hired mentors.

In some cases we may have hired a teacher from the schools. I’d have to go back and check that so it’s not that we would exclude any school personnel at our schools for being hired as a mentor either.

But for the most part yes, they are paid. The other part is that I’m at the University of Minnesota and we’ve developed Check and Connect. And our first mentors on the first project were to my knowledge, all graduate students for the most part.

Again, just a very small percentage may have come with community professional people or any of the educational staff taking a small caseload on. So graduate students – when I have a grant then I can pay them to go to graduate school.

They serve as a mentor and then we have hired mentors. Now the, our randomized control trial, so if you look at the What Works Clearinghouse, those studies have all been with students with disabilities and they’ve all been

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)
**“Engaging Students with School:
The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
Dr. Sandra L. Christenson
January 22, 2008

with students in urban education settings and they've all been with a very diverse, ethnically diverse population of students.

But the majority of that diversity would have been African American students. The other applications where we've had pre/post intervention designs have been in suburban settings. So at this point we have worked with students as early as kindergarten through 12th grade in suburban and in urban settings.

So I hope I remembered all the parts of your question (David).

Moderator: Would you like to take another question (Sandy)?

(Sandra Christenson): Sure.

Moderator: Okay. Can you speak more on the statistics regarding success or lack of regarding Check and Connect?

(Sandra Christenson): Oh, I would be happy to do that. I would encourage people to look at the What Works Clearinghouse in terms of they're saying the evidence base that we have and the criteria that they have used, they would say that we definitely are an evidence based intervention in terms of having students progress in school that we look like we're promising for students to stay in school but that we do not have evidence for actually graduating students.

Now my reading on this is that part of their criteria is they want students to graduate from a traditional high school at the end of four years. And we are working with special education students and they are actually given extra time.

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)
**“Engaging Students with School:
The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
Dr. Sandra L. Christenson
January 22, 2008

And we do have statistically significant differences between Check and Connect students and a control group of students. But it was a five year graduation rate. So What Works Clearinghouse would not say because if their criteria of a four year graduation rate, they wouldn't say that we are at evidence based intervention for actually graduating students.

The other thing I would tell you is that our data with having students randomly assigned to treatment and control is all with I think the highest risk students. If there are students in urban education they are students that are from a poor background.

80 some percent of our students were on free and reduced lunch. They are, and they were students with disabilities. So our students had a fair number of risk factors. And we were able to demonstrate a statistically significant difference between treatment and control for those students.

That's part of that persistent support with Check and Connect. And I often think about and we are hoping that we will be funded to be able to do this, that we have to have a different intervention service delivery system in that it can be costly to have too many students having an individual mentor all the time. So what about small group mentoring or what about an advisor program where students could get some connection in mentoring?

And then we would actually mentor individually less students. If you think of that (unintelligible) of intervention maybe we'd only have to individually mentor those students who are up on the top of that, tip of the triangle, the blue part.

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)
**“Engaging Students with School:
The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
Dr. Sandra L. Christenson
January 22, 2008

So I think it is, we should be commended for the fact that we have statistically significant differences for kids who are randomly assigned to treatment and controls who have such high risk. But we do not necessarily have those, that random assignment for students without disabilities.

There we know that we improved attendance rates but that was a pre/post intervention design. So I can't say the Check and Connect was the reason for that improvement in (a tent). So we really need to implement Check and Connect with different populations of students.

And I do say to myself gee, if a student is just showing signs of disengagement but not a student with disabilities, would we have to implement Check and Connect so intensively? I don't know the answer to that question.

Moderator: Okay (Sandy) I think that concludes all of the web questions at this time. Do you have any closing comments?

(Sandra Christenson): I would like to encourage all of you to be very informed in terms of student engagement. I think it's a very, very important construct. There are at least five or six measures currently that individuals can use. I like the notion that there's a meta construct in terms of integrating many disparate lines of research that are so vitally important.

And we do need to pay attention to students' perceived relevance of their schoolwork and their perceived connection. And when we can intervene on those two variables I think for many of our students who are at highest risk, they're going to have better attendance, better participation.

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD)
**“Engaging Students with School:
The Essential Dimension of Dropout Prevention Programs”**
Dr. Sandra L. Christenson
January 22, 2008

And then better academic achievement which is what we really want. I would tell you that in the State of Minnesota we're starting the school report card and engagement is going to be on that school report card. So we're going to have our schools hopefully, our legislation has to be written yet but we're going through the legislative process.

And I've seen this in other states as well. So the construct of student engagement is not going to go away. And we need to continue to research it and understand it, develop interventions.

I encourage all of you to roll up your sleeves and decide how you're going to just make a little bit of difference in building a relationship and connecting with students to be able to have them feel like school is a warm, friendly place and I can find my niche.

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