



# National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities

## Key Points of Effective Approaches to Increasing Graduation Rates for All Students

**By Dr. Camilla Lehr**

*A Teleseminar presented by  
The National Dropout Prevention Center  
for Students with Disabilities*

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On October 5, the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities presented a teleseminar, “Effective Approaches to Increasing Graduation Rates for All Students.” Dr. Camilla Lehr, a research associate at the Institute on Community Integration in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota, presented research that focuses on dropout prevention, engaging children and youth with disabilities, and promoting positive school climates.

Also participating in the teleseminar was Dr. Loujeania Bost who is the director of the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities. Dr. Bost has an extensive background in working with students with disabilities and was the chief of statewide compliance monitoring and technical assistance for the Pennsylvania Department of Education. She has been a public school teacher, a program administrator serving adults and adolescents with mental retardation, and a researcher.

The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, and its partners, the Education Development Center in Newton, Massachusetts and the Intercultural Development Research Association of San Antonio, welcomed more than 200 listeners to the second teleseminar on Dropout Prevention for Students with Disabilities.

These quarterly seminars are designed to: (1) provide evidence-based information that will be useful to state education agencies, school districts, and schools in the design and implementation of effective dropout prevention programs to help students with disabilities stay in school and graduate, and (2) create dialogue between researchers who have successfully implemented effective approaches to reduce dropout rates, and state education agencies and local school personnel seeking to establish such programs.

The complete teleseminar [transcript](#) is available on the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities’ web site (<http://www.dropoutprevention.org>). The center is also making these *Key Points* available on its web site to community members, educators, policymakers and parents in both Spanish and English.

## KEY POINTS

### **Key Point: There are excellent dropout prevention resources available.**

Some of the dropout prevention resources that educators can access include the following.

*Fostering success in school and beyond for students with emotional/behavioral disorders*, Impact, 18(2), (2005, Spring), University of Minnesota (addresses some of the needs of students with emotional behavioral disorders and the challenges that educators face to keep such students in school). <http://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/182/default.html>

*Essential tools: Increasing rates of school completion: Moving from policy and research to practice: A manual for policymakers, administrators, and educators*, (2004, May), National Center of Secondary Education and Transition (a user-friendly tool summarizing what is known about dropout prevention and examples of evidence-based interventions) <http://www.ncset.org/publications/essentialtools/dropout/default.asp>

*Students with disabilities who drop out of school—Implications for policy and practice*, Issue Brief, 1(2) (2002, June), National Center of Secondary Education and Transition (summarizes information tied to students with disabilities who drop out of school). <http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=425>

### **Key Point: The scant information about dropout and graduation rates for students with disabilities shows that almost half of these students drop out of school.**

Almost half of the states do not report dropout and graduation rate data for students with disabilities. However, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), in its 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to Congress, did report that about 41 percent of students with disabilities ages 14 and older dropped out of school. Only 47 percent received a high school diploma during that same year (2000-01). Of students with disabilities, those with emotional behavioral disorders are most likely to drop out of school.

The National Longitudinal Transition Studies (NLTS) has the most comprehensive data that tracks the progress of students with disabilities. The [first study](#) in the 1990s followed students into adulthood. The [second study](#) tracks 11,000 13- to 16-year-olds who are receiving special education services. The study found that more students with disabilities are completing school, and fewer are dropping out (17 percentage point decrease in the dropout rate between 1987 and 2003), but that students with emotional behavioral disabilities have the lowest completion rate of any category.

“The presence of multiple risk factors does not guarantee that a student will drop out... those predictors are not 100 percent for sure in terms of the student dropping out of school. So we need to be persistent with these kids. And it also points to the power of resilience in terms of promoting protective factors that can help students to be resilient in the face of some of these factors that do place them at risk.”

**Key Point:** **The dropout and graduation rates can be improved by addressing alterable factors such as school policies and school climate.**

Educators can help students stay in school and graduate by making students feel welcome at school and by providing resources that make a difference, such as providing access to computers for students living in poverty; providing direct, individualized tutoring; and providing support to attend class and stay focused on school. Something as simple as welcoming students at the door when they come into school can make a difference for the students who feel they do not belong. The alterable factors for students with disabilities are the same as those for students without disabilities.

“Interestingly, if you look at some of these and you try to kind of simmer it down to three words, you find three words popping up – relationships, rigor and relevance of school and/or coursework to students’ lives.”

**Key Point:** **There are three keys to keeping students in school: (1) family, home and community, (2) individual student attitudes, and (3) school environment.**

A 2002 study by Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr and Hurley synthesized information from a variety of studies and found these keys influenced students’ staying in school. Another factor that helps keep students in school is addressing school completion rather than just dropout prevention. And the earlier this is addressed (elementary school), the better. A good model for this is the [Check and Connect](#) model of student engagement. Schools should also consider other forms of engagement that help students stay in school, including (a) academic engagement (Are students doing their homework? Are they on task, holding their own?); (b) cognitive engagement (Do students understand the relevance of going to high school in terms of their going on to college?); and (c) psychological engagement (Do students have a sense of belonging? Do they feel the school they attend is something they are proud of?).

“One thing that NCLB has done, it seems, is that we need to try to hold those expectations to a higher level so that all of our kids can graduate, even our kids with emotional behavioral disabilities.”

**Key Point:** **Schools can keep students in school using appropriate, research- and evidence-based interventions.**

Numerous studies – including those by Brian Cobb, et al., *Effective Interventions in Dropout Prevention*, the Educational Testing Service’s *One Third of a Nation*, and the latest [Government Accounting Office \(GAO\) report](#) – identify effective interventions, such as Project Grad, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, and the Talent Development Program. The GAO report categorizes the interventions into three types: (1) restructuring schools (e.g., smaller learning communities giving students individualized attention), (2) supplemental services (tutoring, work study programs), and (3) alternative learning environments.

“Students indicated that when teachers were interested in them as a person or helped with personal problems that they felt more connected to school and were more likely to stay in school.”



**Key Point:** Interventions aimed at keeping students, including students with disabilities, in school can be implemented at multiple levels and vary in complexity and comprehensiveness.

Schools can tap universal, selective, or targeted interventions to keep students in school. *Universal* interventions are at a primary prevention level, designed for all students, and are usually implemented at the school or classroom level. They are usually lower in cost and have an indirect effect on variables linked to increasing graduation rates. They help create a positive school climate for students with examples, such as student advisory programs that monitor academic and social development, or outreach to involve students in extracurricular activities.

*Selected* interventions are at the secondary prevention level. They are designed to serve students who have already been identified as exhibiting risk factors associated with dropping out. Examples of selected interventions include adult mentoring programs or programs that work to build specific skills, such as interpersonal communication skills. These interventions cost more than the universal programs given the individualized intervention.

*Targeted* interventions are at the tertiary prevention level that is designed for the one percent to seven percent of students who are considered to be at high risk of dropping out of school. These interventions cost more and are usually a collaborative effort, involving multiple resources from community, home and school. Examples include specific behavior plans or contracts to address individual student needs or alternative programs that provide parenting education classes and on-site daycare for pregnant and parenting youth who have not finished school.

“A teacher and an educator have a very difficult job in terms of working with all of the challenges and children that they need to work with. However, it seems that there needs to be a basic philosophical belief permeating the school – we do persist with all students, we do believe that all students can be successful. And I think a lot of that needs to come from the leadership.”

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*If you would like to contact Dr. Lehr, you are welcome to e-mail her directly at [lehrx001@umn.edu](mailto:lehrx001@umn.edu). You can also visit the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities web site at <http://www.dropoutprevention.org> to learn more about working together to provide successful school outcomes for students with disabilities.*



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