National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities

NDPC-SD

Addressing Dropout Related Factors at the Local Level: Recommendations for Administrators

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IDEAs that Work
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State Education Agencies (SEAs) lead the charge for effective change, impact, and sustainability in the adoption and implementation of programs and practices that promote school completion. 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) reviewing and revising relevant policies (attendance, behavior, credit accrual, exit examinations, professional development) that impact school completion; and (d) collecting post-school outcomes data from youth including interviewing *dropouts* to find out why they left school. SEAs also serve as lead change agents in the adoption and implementation of evidence-based practices (EBPs)

In the adoption and implementation of EBPs, states are responsible for advancing capacity building at the local level that may be obtained via political support, funding, professional development, training, and technical assistance. EBPs may be adopted at the state level, but must also be adopted and implemented at the local level. SEAs' role in capacity building in the area of dropout prevention is key; however, administrators and educators are closest to students and will have the greatest direct impact in improving school completion rates.

At the local level, administrators should be viewed as strong and effective leaders who believe in all students and as such, they lead the charge for the adoption and

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implementation of data-based decision making and evidence-based strategies. Administrators encourage faculty and staff and support their efforts. Administrators build trust by listening to and communicating with students, faculty, staff, parents, and community leaders. Administrators set the charge, lead the way, provide support, stay the course, evaluate outcomes, and make modifications as needed. Furthermore, effective administrators believe that schools are responsible for student learning and thereby, focus on student achievement. They are proactive at both anticipating and addressing challenges and act immediately to seek and provide effective solutions.

Recommendations for Administrators

In order for administrators to effectively attend to dropout and the factors that lead to dropout, they must first view change at the local level occurring within a framework that involves (1) an **efficient infrastructure** that utilizes data-based decision making; (2) **effective instruction** that challenges and actively involves students within the learning process; and an **engaging school climate** which allows all students to feel welcome and supported. As administrators initiate efforts to address and eventually impact school completion rates among students with disabilities, the following recommendations will provide a number of necessary strategies to successfully create change at the local level.

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Infrastructure

- **Establish a framework for local implementation.** A district leadership team should be formed. It is recommended that the team include a diverse group of individuals who can provide valuable input on dropout related factors. Student engagement must be an area of focus. Improving school completion rates encompasses much more than "simply keeping students in school"; students must be engaged within the learning process, therefore, increasing the "holding power" within the classroom and within the school as a whole.

- **Utilize data-based decision making.** Data is our most powerful weapon in effectively addressing dropout and related issues and should be viewed as such. Administrators analyze and utilize data to make informed decisions regarding maintaining present strengths and addressing areas of need. A causal analysis and needs assessment will facilitate identification of major factors that contribute to dropout and will provide a context for developing and implementing improvement practices. As administrators target school level reform to specifically reduce student risk factors and dropout rates, their efforts must be continually evaluated and progress monitored. The creation of a system to routinely monitor risk factors is highly recommended. Focused and extensive assistance for certain groups of students who share specific risk factors is highly recommended.

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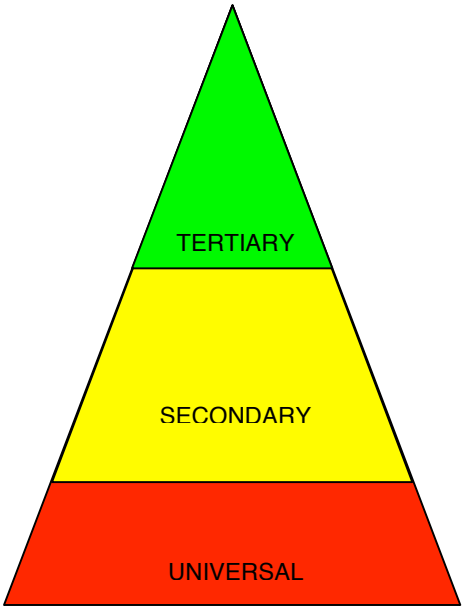
- **Address school completion at multiple levels.** Dropout prevention cannot occur in a vacuum but must be carefully viewed within the context of a major school reform activity, and school leadership plays a pivotal role in the success of initial and sustained dropout prevention efforts. The selection of programs or strategies to address relevant needs must address both protective and risk factors. Match programs to relevant needs and begin intervention early. It is wise not to wait for trouble, but to instead continue to monitor target areas and interventions to ensure fidelity, progression, and success. The implementation of early intervention strategies must be universal in nature and should also focus on prevention. However, secondary and tertiary levels of intervention must also be considered and implemented as needed.



- **Adopt and support the implementation of evidence-based practices.** Evidence-based strategies must be implemented. Considering the number of years students spend in school and the many risk factors that may be present, educators do not have the luxury of continuously implementing practices that have no supporting evidence of their effectiveness. EBPs that promote academic success, decrease inappropriate behavior, increase student engagement, and increase parental involvement are essential components of effective dropout prevention programs.

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- **Expand policy pathways.** Increase options for students with disabilities to earn standard diplomas. Create graduation plans for these students while seeking parental engagement and support within the process. Develop LEA incentives to increase graduation and while simultaneously decreasing dropout. Endorse and share research regarding "what works" in the area of dropout prevention.

- **Stimulate and support change.** The creation of effective change demands strong administrative support and an investment of personnel resources. Consider the adequacy of practices presently in place and the capacity of local personnel to envision and implement change. In the adoption of new practices, consider essential questions: (a) does it work; (b) how well does it work; and (c) will it work with my students. During the implementation of new initiatives, stay the course to ensure that sufficient time has passed, especially when fairly measuring the effectiveness of chosen practices and strategies. Be certain to reasonably balance high ambitions. Change will not occur overnight. Remain persistent and consistent.

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Instruction

- **Focus on effective instruction.** In dropout prevention, effective teaching practices are the first line of defense. Create and implement systemic improvement activities that focus efforts on altering teaching and learning practices. Activities should promote academic engagement that leads to academic success and the acquisition of valuable and functional academic, employment, and independent living skills.

- **Improve instructional content and pedagogy.** High-quality training and ongoing coaching, consultation, and support can assist teachers in making betters use of well-designed curricula. As such, student achievement is enhanced by professional development activities that involve teachers working together to align curricula with standards. Teachers and students benefit from well-designed curricula and lessons plans.

Both academic departments and small learning communities should be considered key venues for academic improvement. Utilize staff meetings for additional opportunities to focus on improving instructional practices linked to major strategies endorsed in the school improvement plan. Administrators may

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review assignments for rigor, and discuss ways of making classroom activities more engaging.

- **Provide transition-focused education for students with IEPs.** Transition-focused education means guiding students towards adult outcomes using academic, career, and extracurricular instruction and activities implemented through instructional and transition approaches and services based on local context and student needs. Administrators should develop systems that support student participation in developing their IEP, identify specific types and levels of accommodations and supports a student will need to participate in post-school environments, ensure IEP teams identify and engage responsible agencies, resources, and accommodations required for students to successfully achieve positive post-school outcomes, and promote the value of preparing for, and participating in, postsecondary education.

- **Provide specialized supports to students who enter school with poor academic skills.** Teach students learning strategies to assist in improving their competence in content area courses. Provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate their progression and the skills they have developed. Students may need assistance in the following areas: (a) note taking;

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(b) reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition; (c) writing and proofing (d) attention and memory/recall; and (e) homework completion and study skills.

- **Assist students in addressing problems that interfere with learning.** Personalize appropriate programs as needed to address individual student needs and improve in-school experiences and post-school outcomes. Facilitate student access to obtain health (physical and mental), social, and other resources needed to meet their emergent basic needs; thereby, enabling students to overcome obstacles that may interfere with the learning process.

School Climate

- **Create a personalized and orderly learning environment.** School climate is key and sets the stage for effective instruction, learning, and student success. Safe and inviting environments facilitate learning and increase school attendance. Similarly, small learning communities make students feel accepted and included and adds to the overall school climate, including interactions with both peers and adults. Moreover, enhancements that increase school-wide social competence and positive behavior supports decrease disciplinary actions that lead to dropout and help create a positive school climate.

- **Encourage relationship building.** Facilitate the enhancement of positive interactions and relationships with both

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peers and adults. Increase opportunities and situations for students to interact with caring adults through organizational structures that provide mentoring relationships (e.g., civic clubs and organizations, service learning, and mentoring organizations). These relationships and connections enrich students' connections to school and aid successful school performance and promote school completion.

- **Listen and support student voice.** Students want help in deciding what they want to do in life and how to act upon their desires. Assist students in identifying and planning both short-term and long-term goals. Assist students in identifying their strengths. Allow students to explore in and outside the classroom those areas they are most interested in, while revealing the connectedness and relevance of their classwork as it relates to their goals and future as productive citizens. Provide diverse and multiple opportunities for students to be successful.

- **Increase family engagement and school involvement.** Parent engagement is just as important as student engagement. Parental involvement is essential and family influence is the most accurate predictor of a student's school achievement. Recruit, support, and value the roles of parents as leaders, teachers, decision makers, resources, and trainer of others. Parents exert a powerful influence over whether their children with disabilities complete high school. Middle school and high school students whose parents remain

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involved during their children's educational careers, tend to have a positive attitude toward school; earn higher grades; score higher on standardized tests; and graduate from high school.

Administrators have a key and vital role in dropout prevention and school completion for students with disabilities. They lead the charge at the local level while simultaneously providing support to students, faculty, staff, parents, and the community as a whole. An administrator is the voice of reason, enthusiasm, and endurance within this charge of improving school completion for students with disabilities. Effective administrators are respected not only for their ability to lead, but also for their ability to hear the voice of others and act appropriately and effectively. Their decision-making skills serve as the necessary tools to support all stakeholders involved, while creating change and keeping in mind that change takes time. However, with diligence and the appropriate framework, administrators can create positive change at the local level for both students and faculty, while increasing school completion rates for students with disabilities.

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