National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities

NDPC-SD

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

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U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

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The process of dropping out of school is not a new phenomenon. Each year, thousands of students exit school informally and most do not return. Moreover, certain groups of students are at greater risk of dropping out as compared to their peers. Students with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable populations for school dropout and are twice as likely to drop out as compared to their non-disabled peers. The highest dropout rates for students with disabilities exist among students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance.

Dropping out is a process of disengagement that begins early, sometimes as early as elementary school. Students at risk of dropping out show signs of disengaging and pulling back from school long before they actually leave. Students disengage due to negative interactions with adults; academic classes perceived as irrelevant; and a lack of satisfaction during their high school years. As a result, students develop negative attitudes toward school. They skip classes or do not attend school altogether. Oftentimes, students earn low grades, are faced with academic failure, and engage in disruptive behavior. In addition, students who are at risk for dropping out seem less interested or concerned about school. They have low expectations for their own success and believe that those around them (i.e., teachers and peers) share their views and hold low expectations for them and their futures as well.

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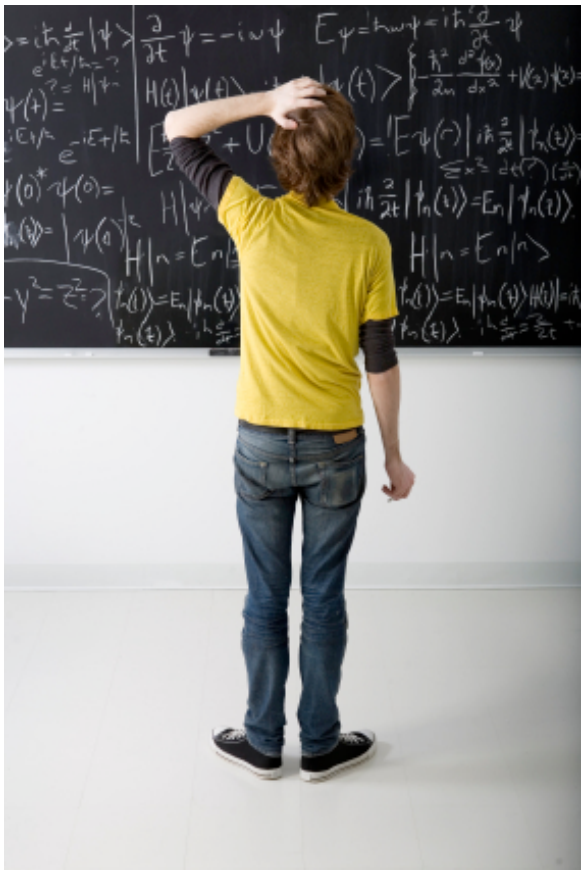
As educators and practitioners continue to seek effective interventions to prevent dropout, they must focus on identifying, monitoring, and addressing risk factors that are influenced by teachers (e.g., academic performance, peer and adult interactions, attendance, and behavior). As a result, teachers' roles in dropout prevention are critical. Teachers have the opportunity to intervene naturally and frequently within their classrooms each day. Teachers can provide support and opportunities for students that buffer "push effects" that lead to dropout (e.g., academic failure; feelings of alienation and isolation; negative attitudes toward school; poor relationships with teachers and peers; and antisocial behavior). In this practice guide, evidence-based strategies and recommendations are provided that teachers may implement within their classrooms to maximize student engagement and buffer “push effects.



In order for teachers to effectively address dropout related factors, it is imperative to view the classroom within the context of three systems: (1) environmental, including adult interactions and peer relationships; (2) instructional, including both curriculum and instruction; and (3) behavioral, including expectations and rules. Within each of these systems are key variables that greatly affect students and their in-school experiences. When properly managed, these three systems work collectively to increase school engagement for students with disabilities.

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Environmental Systems

Environmental systems consist of the physical setting, schedules and routines, and interactions and relationships. Students spend a large portion of their school day in the classroom. A safe and inviting environment facilitates learning, increases school attendance, and encourages students to stay connected and involved, both academically and socially. As such, it is imperative that students feel comfortable and supported while at school, especially in the classroom. Teachers can assist students by implementing the following recommendations.

- **Create a personalized and orderly learning environment.** To ensure success, teachers should manage an organized, efficient, and functional learning environment. Students should be familiar with the classroom schedule and procedures. Classroom procedures and routines create structure and minimize negative interactions and inappropriate behavior, while providing continuity.

- **Build rapport with students.** Teachers are not only role models, but also ambassadors— ambassadors of academic instruction, social skills

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instruction, self-esteem building, goal setting, and relationship building. Therefore, teachers should create welcoming environments that provide clear guidelines and multiple opportunities for success for all students, while considering individual student needs, including students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Make a commitment to ALL students.

- **Assist students with relationship building.** Students at risk of dropping out report feelings of alienation and isolation due to poor relationships with peers and adults. Students need to know that teachers care about them and their future. Students desire acceptance and a sense of belonging and approval from peers and adults Students want teachers who listen to them and are concerned with what they have to say. Students often need assistance in building relationships in a variety of settings with both peers and adults. Their ability to build and maintain positive relationships is facilitated when teachers model and reinforce positive relationships with both peers and adults and frequently acknowledge positive interactions. Students also benefit when teachers highlight the importance of positive relationships both in and outside the classroom.

Instructional Systems

Instructional systems consist of student assessment, curriculum, and instruction. Before students with disabilities physically leave school, most have "academically

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disengaged" and are simply attending classes. For these students, dropping out is imminent unless they become actively and consistently engaged in the learning process. The following strategies can help teachers increase academic engagement within the classroom.

- **Assess a student's skills and knowledge in advance.** Identify the aspect of the curriculum or subject area that may cause difficulty for a student. When addressing "areas of need," provide students with multiple ways to succeed academically and implement evidence-based interventions and strategies that ensure individual student success.

- **Identify the student's goals and your goals for that student—set high expectations and provide support.** Monitor student progress, identify potential barriers to success, and provide accommodations and support. Celebrate success!

- **Make content meaningful and functional.** Provide rigor and relevance during instruction. The classroom experience needs to be relevant to the "real" world. Students must view their classroom experiences as both applicable and significant. Embed pertinent examples within daily academic instruction. Make content meaningful for ALL students. Be certain to include culturally relevant examples throughout the curriculum

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and provide culturally diverse students with equal opportunities to participate during instruction. Effective teachers teach the whole student and respond to individual needs. Effective teachers believe that ALL students can achieve and act upon their beliefs.

- **Maximize time on academic tasks and minimize time on non-instructional activities.** Use instructional time efficiently, provide multiple means of engagement, and provide frequent reinforcement and acknowledgement. Maximize use of active or direct teaching procedures with groups of students.

- **"Emphasize the big picture."** Encourage and remind students often of the importance of academic success and how it relates to their future as productive adults. Highlight the need for achievement within the classroom and its connection to their future success in secondary transition, postsecondary education, supported employment, or independent living.

Behavioral Systems

Behavioral systems consist of expectations and rules; reward systems, discipline, and effective consequences; and a behavior curriculum and social skills instruction. Behaviors are prerequisites for academics, and effective teachers

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have high expectations for both student achievement and behavior. Oftentimes, students' inappropriate behaviors result in academic failure. Problem behaviors coupled with academic difficulties or prior academic failure are key risk factors predictive of school dropout. However, a large number of students have not been taught specific schoolwide expectations or classroom rules and continue to experience academic difficulty, even academic failure. Classroom rules may exist, but students are not completely aware of when and how to effectively display these behaviors, thereby resulting in behavioral errors (i.e., inappropriate behavior). The following principles will guide teachers in effectively addressing behavioral concerns within the classroom.

- **Teach, model, practice, and reinforce/acknowledge classroom rules.** Rules should be stated positively and kept to a minimum. As a rule of thumb, limit classroom rules to a maximum of five. Do not simply post rules. Be certain to review rules persistently, making certain the rules remain relevant and students no longer need clarification. Apply rules consistently, considering the background of ALL students. Make certain rules are explicit, fair, and equitable.

- **Teach social skills as a proactive approach.** Teaching social skills involves the following steps: (1) teaching, (2) modeling, (3) practicing and (4) performance feedback (i.e., providing feedback and positive reinforcement in the form of acknowledgment, and often times, rewards, both verbal

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and non-verbal. Specifically, both verbal acknowledgement and reward are stated positively and are behavior specific. In many cases, acknowledging and rewarding may be considered one in the same; however, often times, depending on the developmental stage or chronological age of the student and the specific practices outlined within a program or school's discipline plan, they may be viewed differently. As such, one may be preferred over the other. In either case, it is essential that students are positively reinforced during social skills instruction, once they have had a chance to model the specific skill, including an example and non-example. Moreover, performance feedback is essential and helps to ensure acquisition of skills.

- Furthermore, social skills instruction teaches and reinforces replacement behaviors. Students learn appropriate behaviors when replacement behaviors are effectively taught. However, replacement behaviors must be consistently and persistently reinforced. Teaching social skills is the "unwritten curriculum" that, if not addressed, will greatly impede the implementation of the written curriculum. Teachers may also imbed social skills instruction within academic lessons through daily instruction.

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- **Provide multiple opportunities for practice and feedback.** To retain new behaviors, students must be given specific, positive feedback and opportunities to practice the behaviors. Students learn appropriate behavior in the same manner they learn to read—through instruction, practice, feedback, and encouragement. Re-teach as needed! Even though a specific skill was previously taught, multiple opportunities must be consistently provided students to practice. Multiple opportunities for practice increase the likelihood that the specific skill or behavior will occur more often. The additional opportunities to practice build fluency, during which, specific, positive feedback is provided to maintain and further reinforce the desired behavior.

Effective strategies implemented across environmental, instructional, and behavioral systems help ameliorate classroom effects faced by students who are at risk of dropping out. Teachers are invaluable and the implementation of effective classroom practices represents a key and vital dropout prevention strategy at the local level. However, dropout prevention is not primarily a teacher issue, it is a systems issue; whereas, school-wide systems should ensure success for both students and teachers. As such, teachers must receive support when implementing strategies within the classroom (i.e., across environmental, instructional, and behavioral systems)

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to effectively address dropout and related factors. Teachers' efforts should not go unnoticed, but instead should be acknowledged, reinforced, and rewarded. As a result, teachers will feel empowered, as will their students.

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Additional Resources

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