*A Center Policy & Practice Report**

Dropout Prevention:
Do Districts Pursue Best Practice Recommendations?

(October, 2011)

Abstract

This report focuses on the reality that the dropout situation is unlikely to improve as long as policy and practice fail to ensure students have a comprehensive system of student and learning supports. To highlight the intervention problem, the emphasis is on first comparing federal practice guidance recommendations for addressing the dropout problem with data about what schools are doing; then, we stress the need to embed dropout prevention into development of a unified and comprehensive component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students at every school.

Dropout Prevention:
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Available evidence suggests that more than half a million young people drop out of high school each year, and the rate at which they drop out has remained about the same for the last 30 years (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008). A 2011 report indicates that the averaged freshman graduation rate in 2008-09 was 63.5 percent for Black students, 64.8 percent for American Indian/Alaska Native students, 65.9 percent for Hispanic students, compared to 82.0 percent for White students and 91.8 percent for Asian/Pacific Islander students (Stillwell, Sable, & Plotts, 2011).

As Gary Orfield, director of the Civil Rights project has stressed:

> There is a high school dropout crisis far beyond the imagination of most Americans, concentrated in urban schools and relegating many thousands of minority children to a life of failure. ... Only half of our nation's minority students graduate from high school along with their peers. For many groups – Latino, black, or Native American males-graduation rates are even lower. ... this [is an] educational and civil rights crisis.

In terms of economics, social programs, and public health, Russell Rumberger has pointed out that the U.S.A. loses over $192 billion in income and tax revenues for each cohort of students who never complete high school. Relatedly, Dynarski and colleagues (2008) emphasize:

> Dropouts contribute only about half as much in taxes.... They draw larger government subsidies in the form of food stamps, housing assistance, and welfare payments. They have a dramatically increased chance of landing in prison, and they have worse health outcomes and lower life expectancies.

The purpose of this report is not to rehash these data. Our focus is on the reality that the dropout situation is unlikely to improve as long as policy and practice fail to ensure students have a comprehensive system of student and learning supports. To highlight the intervention problem, the emphasis is on first comparing federal practice guidance recommendations for addressing the dropout problem with data about what schools are doing; then, we stress the need to embed dropout prevention into development of a unified and comprehensive component for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students at every school.

Recommendations from the *What Works Clearinghouse*

In 2008, the U. S. Department of Education's *What Works Clearinghouse* provided a practice guide on *Dropout Prevention* (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008). The guide is based on the review of evidence based interventions and provides a level of evidence for each of six intervention recommendations.

Recognizing that individual strategies can only help a relatively few students, the guide's authors stress that "the greatest success

in reducing dropout rates will be achieved where multiple approaches are adopted as part of a comprehensive strategy to increase student engagement." They also emphasize that

> "increasing student engagement is critical to preventing dropping out. ... Engagement includes both behavioral and psychological components. Attendance, class participation, effort in doing schoolwork, and avoidance of disciplinary actions (notably suspensions) are behavioral indicators of engagement, while interest and enthusiasm, a sense of belonging, and identification with the school constitutes psychological engagement. Both aspects of engagement have been associated with dropping out of school Attendance in school activities and feeling a sense of belonging in the school community are both critical components of school engagement and should be addressed as part of dropout prevention or intervention strategies."

> "Engagement involves active participation in learning and schoolwork as well as in the social life of school. While dropping out typically occurs during high school, the disengagement process may begin much earlier and include academic, social, and behavioral components. The trajectory of a young person progressing in school begins in elementary grades, where students establish an interest in school and the academic and behavioral skills necessary to successfully proceed.
> During the middle school years, students' interest in school and academic skills may begin to lag, so that by ... high school, students ... may need intensive individual support or other supports to re-engage them.... Educators and policymakers need to consider how to implement intermediate strategies aimed at increasing student engagement."

From this perspective, they offer recommendations related to the following three areas for practice:

- diagnostic processes for identifying student-level and school-wide dropout problems

- targeted interventions for a subset of middle and high school students who are identified as at risk of dropping out

- school-wide reforms designed to enhance for all students and prevent dropout more generally

With respect to "diagnostic processes", the recommendation focuses on identifying the magnitude of the problems and the specific students at risk of dropping out:

> *Utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out. States, districts and schools should develop comprehensive, longitudinal, student level databases with unique IDs that, at a minimum, include data on students absences, grade retention, and low academic achievement. Data should be reviewed regularly with a particular emphasis before the transitions to middle school and high school.*

Three complementary recommendations focus on "targeting students who are the most at risk of dropping out by intensively intervening in their academic, social, and personal lives. ... Successful identification can permit the implementation of intensive targeted interventions." The panel suggests using them together.

> *Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out. Adult advocates should have an appropriate back ground and low caseloads, and be purposefully matched with students. Adequate training and support should be provided for advocates.*

> *Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance. Help students to improve academic performance and re-engage in school. This should be implemented in conjunction with other recommendations.*

> *Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills. Students should establish attainable academic and behavioral goals and be recognized when they accomplish them. Schools can teach strategies*

Two recommendations emphasize the need for "comprehensive, school-wide reform strategies aimed at increasing engagement of all students in school. These might be adopted in schools with unusually high dropout rates, where a large proportion of the student population is at risk. These recommendations recognize the fact that dropping out is not always or entirely a function of the attitudes, behaviors, and external environment of the students—that dysfunctional schools can encourage dropping out." They

stress that when the school is part of the problem, the following recommendations "propose ambitious efforts to change the environment, curriculum, and culture of the school."

> *Personalize the learning environment and instructional process. A personalized learning environment creates a sense of belonging and fosters a school climate where students and teachers get to know one another and can provide academic, social, and behavioral encouragement.*

> *Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school. Engagement can be increased by providing students with the necessary skills to complete high school and by introducing students to postsecondary options.*

What Districts Do About Dropouts

In September, 2011, the U. S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics released findings from a national survey of *Dropout Prevention Services and Programs in Public School Districts: 2010-11* (Carver & Lewis, 2011). For the survey, dropout prevention interventions were defined as "services and programs intended to increase the rate at which students are staying in school, progressing toward graduation, or earning a high school credential."

The self-report survey was designed for all types of districts (and was mailed to 1,200 public school districts), including those without high school grades; response rate was 91%. The structured instrument asked about specific services and programs that districts "may provide to students at various levels, including those in elementary and middle/junior high school, that are designed to support students who are struggling academically or who may be at future risk of dropping out."

The report states it "provides national data about how public school districts identify students at risk of dropping out, programs used specifically to address the needs of students at risk of dropping out of school, the use of mentors for at-risk students, and efforts to encourage dropouts to return to school." The authors caution:

> "Because this report is purely descriptive in nature, readers are cautioned not to make causal inferences about the data presented .... they are not meant to emphasize any particular issue. The findings are estimates of

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dropout prevention services and programs available in public school districts rather than estimates of students served. Percentages of districts and students do not have the same distributions. For example, although only 5 percent of public school districts in the United States are located in cities, about 31 percent of all students are enrolled in these districts."

An obvious further caution is that, as with any survey of public school interventions, the specifics asked are quite circumscribed. Moreover, despite the researchers' caveat, the data may well be interpreted by some as indicating not only that this is what schools are doing, but that it is what they should be doing.

To underscore how limited the survey data on dropout prevention are, we have used the reported findings to create the table on the following pages. The table groups interventions covered by the survey in terms of specific examples mentioned in the *What Works Clearinghouse* guide for dropout prevention.

A general comparison of the recommended practices with the items asked in the survey makes evident the narrowness of the instrument's focus. Particularly lost is the emphasis on approaches that embed dropout prevention into comprehensive, school-wide improvements and reforms.

Thus, while the report's findings describe some of what districts are doing to address the dropout problem, there are many other relevant interventions districts undoubtedly are pursuing for which data are not yet reported. As a result, even the descriptive value of the data reported is highly circumscribed and has little to say about what schools need to do.

Given the continuing intractability of the dropout problem, schools clearly need to do much more than the survey indicates they are doing. The federal practice guide certainly emphasizes that point and stresses the need to build on strategies and practices that have demonstrated promise in reducing dropout rates. Our analyses of what schools do and are not doing suggest that moving forward requires embedding the best of dropout prevention efforts into the development of a comprehensive system of student and learning supports that is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice.

Table
Some Findings from *Dropout Prevention Services and Programs in Public School Districts: 2010-11*: A Report from the U. S. Department of Education

Reporting Districts indicated the following:

(1) Schoolwide Interventions

>Transition Supports (e.g., from middle school to high school)

What was offered all students in at least one school	Percentage of schools	
	middle schools	high schools
• an assigned student mentor	10%	20%
• an assigned adult mentor	17%	26%
• an advisement class	24%	40%

>Addressing Behavior Problems Using a Formal Program Schoolwide

69% Elementary schools   61% middle schools   49% high schools

(2) Identifying the Magnitude of the Problem and Identifying Specific Students at Risk of Dropping Out

Factors Extensively Used in Identifying Students	Percentage of schools
• academic failure	76%
• truancy or excessive absences	64%
• behaviors that warrant suspension or expulsion	45%

(3) Targeted Interventions to Provide Support for Identified Students

What was offered for targeted students	Percentage of schools		
	elementary	middle schools	high schools
• tutoring	75%	79%	84%
• summer school	54%	58%	67%
• remediation classes	61%	69%	79%
• guided study hall/ academic support	36%	63%	70%
• alternative schools/programs	20%	44%	76%
• after-school programs	42%	45%	45%

(4) Providing Information to Receiving Schools about the unique needs of transitioning at-risk students

>84% of districts reported doing so

Table (cont.)

(5) Educational Options for High School Students at Risk of Dropping Out

What was offered	Percentage of schools
• Credit recovery courses	88%
• smaller class size	72%
• early graduation options	63%
• self-paced courses other than credit recovery	55%

Of districts with career and technical *high schools*:
>15% reported that most at risk students participate
>75% reported some at risk students participate.

Of districts with career and technical *courses at a regular high school*:
>26% reported that most at-risk students participate
>66% report that some at-risk students participate.

(6) Use of "Mentors" Specifically to Address Needs of Students at Risk of Dropping Out

What was offered for targeted students	Percentage of schools		
	elementary	middle schools	high schools
• student mentors	25%	28%	39%
• school counselors, teachers, or school administrators to formally mentor	60%	66%	77%
• adult mentors employed by the district	6%	9%	12%
• community volunteers	35%	30%	30%

(7) Worked with Community to Address the Needs of Students at Risk of Dropping out

Which Resource	Percentage of schools
• child protective services	85%
• community mental health agency	73%
• state or local government agency providing financial assistance to needy families	68%
• Churches of community organizations	54%
• health clinic or hospital	50%

Moving Forward

We begin by affirming that it is a given that a strong academic program is the foundation from which all other school interventions must operate. Clearly, the base for equity is effective personalized instruction (e.g., instructional approaches that account for both individual and group interests, strengths, and weaknesses). However, if there is to be equity of opportunity with respect to public education, policy guidelines and practices also must meet the challenge of enabling learning by addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

While districts are doing a great deal to address the dropout problem dropout rates remain too high, especially in some districts. The *What Works Clearinghouse* recommendations are good as far as they go. However, the dropout problem cannot and should not be treated as separate from the many other problems schools must address to ensure equity of opportunity for all students. These problems include concerns about increasing attendance, reducing behavior problems, enhancing safety, closing the achievement gap, and on and on. Moreover, it should be clear to everyone that schools with the most dropouts are the ones most in need of a school improvement process that addresses all these matters with a comprehensive and unified system.

Analyses of school improvement policies, plans, and practices substantiate that the trend is for districts and their schools to attempt to address each problem as a separate initiative (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008; 2011a; 2011b). The picture that emerges is one of ad hoc, fragmented, and flawed policies and practices. This has led to proposals to coordinate the many fragmented programs and services. However, as our analyses have stressed, fragmentation tends to reflect the problem that student and learning support initiatives are marginalized in school improvement policy and practice (Adelman & Taylor, 2000, 2008, 2009, 2011a, b).

The policy need is to end the marginalization; the practice need is to develop a unified and comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. From both a policy and practice perspective, this involves embedding separate initiatives, such as those for preventing dropouts, bullying, and all others focused on learning, behavior, and emotional concerns, into a comprehensive component for student and learning supports.

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THE CHALLENGE

- Every school has a wide range of learners and must ensure equity of opportunity for *all* students and not just a few.

- External and internal barriers to learning and teaching interfere with schools achieving their mission.

- For the many students in need, school districts must design and implement learning support systems that are comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive, and institutionalize them at every school.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

- Learning support systems must address barriers to learning and teaching and ensure that students are engaged and re-engaged in classroom learning. Such systems must reflect the best available science, with a special emphasis on intrinsic motivation theory and practices. A key facet of this not only involves engaging students from the point at which they enter but, after a few years of schooling, also requires a strong emphasis on re-engaging those who have actively disengaged from learning what schools are trying to teach them. Re-engagement that is productive of learning is not about increasing social control, it is about promoting intrinsic motivation (see the relevant references at the end of this article).

- In order to meet the goal of all children learning to high standards or reaching proficiency, the system of learning supports must be fully integrated with instruction.

- Developing a comprehensive system of learning supports requires weaving together the resources of school, home, and community. This involves an operational infrastructure that ensures the learning supports system is treated as primary and essential in planning school improvement.

- Equity requires developing a comprehensive system of learning supports in every school in a district.

- Engagement and re-engagement at school (for students, staff, parents, and other stakeholders) requires empowerment of all and use of processes that equalize power and ensure equity and fairness in decision making. Equalizing power among stakeholders involves contractual agreements, and considerable capacity building.

- Engagement and re-engagement at school requires moving beyond an overemphasis on behavior modification to practices based on a deep understanding of intrinsic motivation (see Appendix).

As Judy Jeffrey, then chief state school officer for Iowa, stressed in introducing Iowa's design for a comprehensive system of supports:

> "Through our collective efforts, we must meet the learning needs of all students. Not every student comes to school motivationally ready and able to learn. Some experience barriers that interfere with their ability to profit from classroom instruction. Supports are needed to remove, or at least to alleviate, the effects of these barriers. Each student is entitled to receive the supports needed to ensure that he or she has an equal opportunity to learn and to succeed in school. This [design] provides guidance for a new direction for student support that brings together the efforts of schools, families, and communities.
>
> If every student in every school and community in Iowa is to achieve at high levels, we must rethink how student supports are organized and delivered to address barriers to learning. This will require that schools and school districts, in collaboration with their community partners, develop a comprehensive, cohesive approach to delivery of learning supports that is an integral part of their school improvement efforts" (Iowa Department of Education, 2004).

Moving to a Three Component Framework for Improvement Policy

Policy analyses indicate school improvement initiatives are dominated by a two component framework. That is, the main thrust is on improving (1) instruction and (2) governance/ management. Where there are student support programs and services, they are marginalized and pursued in piecemeal and fragmented ways. School improvement policy has paid little or no attention to rethinking these learning supports. Continuing this state of affairs works against ensuring *all* students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

Policy for improving schools needs to shift from a two- to a three-component framework. The third component encompasses student and learning supports designed to address barriers to learning and teaching, including re-engagement of disconnected students. This third component becomes the unifying concept and umbrella under which all resources currently expended for student and learning supports are woven together. Its adoption represents a paradigm shift in school improvement policy – from a *marginalized and fragmented* set of student support *services* to development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive *system* that enables students to benefit from improved instruction.

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As with the other two components, such an enabling or learning supports system must be treated in policy and practice as primary and essential in order to combat the marginalization and fragmentation of the work. Furthermore, to be effective it must be fully integrated with the other two components. Properly conceived, the component provides a blueprint and roadmap for transforming the many pieces into a comprehensive and cohesive system at all levels and in no way detracts from the fact that a strong academic program is the foundation from which all other school-based interventions must flow. Indeed, an enabling or learning supports component provides an *essential* systemic way to address factors that interfere with academic performance and achievement.

Many places are referring to third component elements as *learning supports*. And increasingly, learning supports are being defined as the resources, strategies, and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports intended to *enable* all pupils to have an equal opportunity for success at school. Whatever the component is called, it is a transformational concept.

Our prototype framework operationalizes the component as a system that encompasses three *integrated subsystems* and six arenas for *organizing content*. The subsystems stress

- promoting healthy development and preventing problems

- responding as early after problem onset as is feasible

- providing for those whose serious, pervasive, and chronic problems require more intensive assistance and accommodation.

The six arenas for organizing content emphasize enhancing supports within the classroom and extending beyond the classroom to include school and community resources. Specifically, the focus is on:

- enhancing the ability of the classroom teacher and others to facilitate learning through prevention and intervention as early after problem onset as feasible

- increasing home involvement and engagement in schools and schooling (a critical and too often underdeveloped arena in addressing the dropout and a variety of other problems)

- providing support for the many transitions experienced by students and their families

- expanding community involvement and engagement through volunteers, businesses, agencies, faith-based organizations, etc.

- responding to and preventing crises, violence, bullying, substance abuse, etc.

- providing specialized student and family assistance when necessary.

The above elements are essential to a school's ability to accomplish its instructional mission; they do not represent an agenda separate from that mission. Moreover, the emphasis on classroom, school, home, and neighborhood helps create a school-wide culture of caring and nurturing. In turn, this helps students, families, staff, and the community at large feel a school is a welcoming, supportive place that accommodates diversity, prevents problems, and enhances youngsters' strengths and is committed to assuring equal opportunity for all students to succeed at school.

In operationalizing the third component, the focus is on weaving together what schools at all levels already are doing and enhancing the effort by inviting in home and community resources to help fill high priority systemic gaps related to (1) the *continuum* of interconnected systems of interventions and (2) the multifaceted set of *content arenas* that are cohesively integrated into classrooms and school-wide interventions. And, of course, the third component must be fully integrated with the instructional and management components in school improvement policy and practice.

Comprehensiveness = More than Coordination & Much More than Enhancing Availability and Access to Health and Social Services

Too often, what is being identified as *comprehensive* is not comprehensive enough, and generally the approach described is not about *developing a system* of supports but only about enhancing coordination of fragmented efforts. Many times the main emphasis is on health and social services, usually with the notion of *connecting* more community services to schools. In some instances, the focus expands to include a variety of piecemeal programs for safe and drug free schools, family assistance, after-school and summer programs, and so forth. All these programs and services are relevant. But, most proposals to improve supports still fail to escape old ways of thinking about what schools need to develop a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. The need is to reframe services and integrate them and other piecemeal and ad hoc initiatives for addressing barriers to learning, development, and teaching.

The tangential solution to the widespread fragmentation continues to be a call for improving coordination, communication, and coherence and flexibility in use of resources. While these are important attributes in improving student and learning supports, this emphasis stops short of establishing the type of expanded school improvement policy and practice needed to develop and fully integrate a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

Concluding Comments

Do schools pursue best practices? Certainly, the intent is there. No one argues against using the best science available to improve schools. However, so much of what is offered as best practices for preventing dropouts, bullying, and other behavior, learning, and emotional problems stems from highly controlled research focused on specific types of problems. Moreover, it is well to remember that the term *best* simply denotes that a practice is better than whatever else is currently available. How *good* it is depends on complex analyses related to costs and benefits.

It is clear that schools need and want considerable help in improving outcomes for all students. It is also evident that the limited outcomes generated by many specific *best* practices for addressing barriers to learning and teaching have led to growing recognition of the need for a comprehensive and unified systemic approach to these concerns. And, while the lowest performing schools probably are most in need of developing such a system, it is evident that all high poverty, low performing schools and most other schools are expending significant resources on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students with too little payoff and accountability.

Unfortunately, student and learning supports often are poorly conceived and are designed in ways that meet the needs of relatively few students. In part, this is the product of two-component thinking. In this time of need and change, it is essential that policy makers move to a *three-component framework* for turning around, transforming, and continuously improving schools. The third component will provide a unifying concept and an umbrella under which districts and schools can weave together best practices for student and learning supports.

> Pioneering work is underway . We anticipate more and more movement in this direction at state, regional, district, and school levels (see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/trailblazing.htm).

The call for ensuring equity and opportunity for all students demands no less.

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Use the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Dropout Prevention* for more:
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/dropout.html

This resource contains links to key references, empirically supported programs, and centers specializing in the topic and related topics.

Other Quick Finds that may be helpful (see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/ click on Quick Find Search)

>Barriers to Learning   >Classroom Climate   >Classroom-focused Enabling
>Environments that Support Learning   >Learning Supports: Students to Succeed
>Mentoring   >Motivation   >Parent/Home Involvement
>Parenting Skills and Parenting Education >Prevention for Students "At Risk"
>Resilience/Protective Factors   >Social Promotion

For more on all this, see the *About New Directions for Student Support* online at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm

Additional references and information on dropouts can be found on such websites as:

National Dropout Prevention Centers – http://www.dropoutprevention.org/
High School Graduation Initiative also known as School Dropout Prevention Program –
http://www.ed.gov/programs/dropout/index.html

Appendix

Motivation is a Primary Concern in Addressing All Students

Getting students involved in their education programs is more than having them participate; it is connecting students with their education, enabling them to influence and affect the program and, indeed, enabling them to become enwrapped and engrossed in their educational experiences.

Wehmeyer & Sands (1998)

Most students who dropout have manifested a range of learning, behavior, and emotional concerns. Whatever the initial cause of these problems, the longer the individual has lived with them, the more likely s/he will have negative feelings and thoughts about instruction, teachers, and schools. The feelings include anxiety, fear, frustration, and anger. The thoughts may include strong expectations of failure and vulnerability and assignment of a low value to many learning "opportunities." Such thoughts and feelings can result in low and often avoidance motivation for learning and performing in many areas of schooling.

Low motivation leads to half-hearted effort. Avoidance motivation leads to avoidance behaviors. Individuals with avoidance and low motivation often also are attracted to socially disapproved activity. Poor effort, avoidance behavior, and active pursuit of disapproved behavior on the part of students become cyclical and are sure-fire recipes for failure and worse.

Early in the cycle it is tempting to focus directly on student misbehavior. And, it also is tempting to think that behavior problems at least can be exorcized by "laying down the law." We have seen many administrators pursue this line of thinking. For every student who "shapes up," ten others experience a Greek tragedy that inevitably ends in the student being pushed-out of school through a progression of suspensions, "opportunity" transfers, and expulsions. Official dropout figures don't tell the tale. What we see in most high schools in cities such as Los Angeles, Baltimore, D.C., Miami, and Detroit is that only about half or less of those who were enrolled in the ninth grade are still around to graduate from 12th grade.

Most of these students entered kindergarten with a healthy curiosity and a desire to learn to read and write. By the end of 2nd grade, we start seeing the first referrals by classroom teachers because of learning and behavior problems. From that point on, increasing numbers of students become disengaged from classroom learning, and most of these manifest some form of behavioral and emotional problems.

It is commonplace to find that when students are not engaged in the lessons at hand they tend to pursue other activity. Many individuals with learning problems also are described as hyperactive, distractible, impulsive, behavior disordered, and so forth. Their behavior patterns are seen as interfering with efforts to remedy their learning problems. As teachers and other staff try to cope with those who are disruptive, the main concern usually is "classroom management."

At one time, a heavy dose of punishment was the dominant approach. Currently, the stress is on more positive practices designed to provide "behavior support" in and out of the classroom. These include a focus on social skills training, asset development, character education, and positive behavior support initiatives.

It has been heartening to see the shift from punishment to positive behavior support in addressing unwanted behavior. However, until factors leading to disengagement are addressed, we risk perpetuating what William Ryan warns is a tendency to *blame the victim.*

**It Begins with Personalized Instruction
and Key to this is Matching Motivation**

For some time, efforts to improve learning in classrooms have revolved around the concepts of individualized or personalized instruction. The two concepts overlap in their emphasis on developmental differences. Indeed, the major thrust in most *individualized* approaches is to account for individual differences in developmental capability. *Personalization,* however, is defined as the process of accounting for individual differences in both capability and motivation.

For motivated learners, either individualized or personalized instruction can be quite effective in helping them attain their goals. Sometimes all that is needed is to provide the opportunity to learn. At other times, teaching facilitates learning by leading, guiding, stimulating, clarifying, and supporting. Both approaches require knowing when, how, and what to teach and when and how to structure the situation so students can learn on their own. However, for students for whom classroom learning is not going well, motivation is a primary consideration, and the concept of personalization provides the best guide to practice (and research).

Personalization needs to be understood as a psychological construct. From a motivational perspective, the *learner's perception* is a critical factor in defining whether the environment is a good fit. Matching motivation requires factoring in students' perceptions in determining the right mix of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. It also requires understanding the role played by expectations of outcome. This is fundamental to engaging (and re-engaging) students in classroom learning.

Given this, the key is ensuring learning opportunities are *perceived by learners* as good ways to reach their goals. And, therefore, a basic assessment concern is that of eliciting learners' perceptions of how well teaching and learning environments match both their interests and abilities. That is, at its core, personalized instruction is about attending as much to motivational differences as to differences in capabilities. Indeed, there are instances when the primary focus is on motivation. The implications for prevention and use of response to intervention strategies are obvious.

Re-engaging Students

All behavior-focused interventions must go a step farther and include
a focus on helping teachers re-engage students in classroom learning

With respect to engagement in classroom learning, the first strategic step is to ensure a good motivational match. With respect to dropout prevention, this involves modifying classrooms to ensure a caring context for learning and instruction that is highly responsive to a wide range of learner differences in motivation and development. With all this in place, the next step involves providing special assistance as needed. This step calls for strategies that focus on addressing the needs of specific students and families.

Of particular concern is what teachers do when they encounter a student who has disengaged and is misbehaving. In most cases, the emphasis shouldn't be first and foremost on implementing social control techniques. What teachers need are strategies to re-engage those students who have disconnected and are resistant to standard instruction.

Although motivation is a long-standing concern at schools, the focus usually is on extrinsics, especially in managing behavior, but also in conjunction with direct skill instruction. For example, interventions are designed to improve impulse control, perseverance, selective attention, frustration tolerance, sustained attention and follow-through, and social awareness and skills. In all cases, the emphasis is on reducing or eliminating interfering behaviors, usually with the presumption that the student will then re-engage in learning. However, there is little evidence that these strategies enhance a student's motivation toward classroom learning (National Research Council, 2004).

Ironically, the reliance on extrinsics to control behavior may exacerbate student problems. Motivational research suggests that when people perceive their freedom (e.g., of choice) is threatened, they have a psychological reaction that motivates them to restore their sense of freedom. (For instance, when those in control say: *You can't do that ... you must do this ...,* the covert and sometimes overt psychological reaction of students often is: *Oh, you think so!*) This line of research also suggests that with prolonged denial of freedom, people's reactivity diminishes, they become amotivated, and usually feel helpless and ineffective.

Some General Strategic Considerations

Psychological research over the last fifty years has brought renewed attention to motivation as a central concept in understanding school problems. This work is just beginning to find its way into professional development programs. One line of work has emphasized the relationship of learning and behavior problems to deficiencies in *intrinsic* motivation. This work clarifies the value of interventions designed to increase

- feelings of self-determination

- feelings of competence and expectations of success

- feelings of interpersonal relatedness

- the range of interests and satisfactions related to learning.

Activities to correct deficiencies in intrinsic motivation are directed at improving awareness of personal motives and true capabilities, learning to set valued and appropriate goals, learning to value and to make appropriate and satisfying choices, and learning to value and accept responsibility for choice.

The point for emphasis here is that re-engaging students and maintaining their engagement in learning involves matching motivation. Matching motivation requires an appreciation of the importance of a student's perceptions in determining the right mix of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. It also requires understanding the central role played by expectations related to outcome. Without a good match, social control strategies can suppress negative attitudes and behaviors, but re-engagement in classroom learning is unlikely.

To clarify matters with respect to designing new directions for student support for disengaged students, below are four general strategies to think about. In each instance, families and others at home and in the neighborhood could play a significant role if they can be mobilized.

Clarifying student perceptions of the problem – It is desirable to create a situation where students can talk openly why they have become disengaged. This provides an invaluable basis for formulating a personalized plan for helping alter their negative perceptions and for planning ways to prevent others from developing such perceptions.

Reframing school learning – For disengaged students, major reframing in teaching approaches is required so that these students (a) view the teacher as supportive (rather than controlling and indifferent) and (b) perceive content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable. It is important, for example, to eliminate threatening evaluative measures; reframe content and processes to clarify purpose in terms of real life needs and experiences and underscore how it all builds on previous learning; and clarify why the procedures are expected to be effective – especially those designed to help correct specific problems.

Renegotiating involvement in school learning – New and mutual agreements must be developed and evolved over time through conferences with the student and where appropriate including parents. The intent is to affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. The focus throughout is on clarifying awareness of valued options, enhancing expectations of positive outcomes, and engaging the student in meaningful, ongoing decision making. For the process to be most effective, students should be assisted in sampling new processes and content, options should include valued enrichment opportunities, and there must be provision for reevaluating and modifying decisions as perceptions shift.

Reestablishing and maintaining an appropriate working relationship – This requires the type of ongoing interactions that creates a sense of trust, open communication, and provides personalized support and direction.

Options and Student Decision Making as Key Facets

To maintain re-engagement and prevent disengagement, the above strategies must be pursued using processes and content that:

- minimize threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to valued others

- maximize such feelings (included here is an emphasis on taking steps to enhance public perception that the school and classroom are welcoming, caring, safe, and just places)

- guide motivated practice (e.g., organize and clarify opportunities for meaningful application of learning)

- provide continuous information on learning and performance in ways that highlight accomplishments

- provide opportunities for continued application and generalization (e.g., ways in which students can pursue additional, self-directed learning or can arrange for more support and direction).

Obviously, it is no easy task to decrease well-assimilated negative attitudes and behaviors. And, the task is likely to become even harder with the escalation toward high-stakes testing policies (no matter how well-intentioned). It also seems obvious that, *for many schools, enhanced achievement test scores will only be feasible when a significant number of disengaged students are re-engaged in learning at school.*

All this argues for
- minimizing student disengagement and maximizing re-engagement by moving school culture toward a greater focus on intrinsic motivation and
- minimizing psychological reactance and enhancing perceptions that lead to re-engagement in learning at school by rethinking social control practices.

From a motivational perspective, key facets of accomplishing this involve enhancing student options and decision making.

A greater proportion of individuals with avoidance or low motivation for learning at school are found among those with learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems. For these individuals, few currently available options may be appealing. How much greater the range of options needs to be depends primarily on how strong avoidance tendencies are. In general, however, the initial strategies for working with such students involve

- further expansion of the range of options for learning (if necessary, this includes avoiding established curriculum content and processes)

- primarily emphasizing areas in which the student has made personal and active decisions

- accommodation of a wider range of behavior than usually is tolerated (e.g., a widening of limits on the amount and types of "differences" tolerated)

From a motivational perspective, one of the most basic concerns is the way in which students are involved in making decisions about options. Critically, decision-making processes can lead to perceptions of coercion and control or to perceptions of real choice (e.g., being in control of one's destiny, being self-determining). Such differences in perception can affect whether a student is mobilized to pursue or avoid planned learning activities and outcomes.

People who have the opportunity to make decisions among valued and feasible options tend to be committed to following through. In contrast, people who are not involved in decisions often have little commitment to what is decided. And if individuals disagree with a decision that affects them, besides not following through they may react with hostility.

Thus, essential to programs focusing on motivation are decision-making processes that affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. Special concerns here are:

- Decisions are based on current perceptions. As perceptions shift, it is necessary to reevaluate decisions and modify them in ways that maintain a mobilized learner.

- Effective and efficient decision making is a basic skill, and one that is as fundamental

as the three Rs. Thus, if an individual does not do it well initially, this is not a reason to move away from learner involvement in decision making. Rather, it is an assessment of a need and a reason to use the process not only for motivational purposes, but to improve this basic skill.

- Remember that, among students manifesting learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems, the most fundamental decision often is whether they want to participate or not. That is why it may be necessary in specific cases temporarily to put aside established options and standards. As we have stressed, for some students the decision to participate in a proactive way depends on whether they perceive the learning environment as positively different – and quite a bit so – from the one in which they had so often experienced failure .

Reviews of the literature on human motivation suggest that providing students with options and involving them in decision making are key facets of addressing the problem of engagement in the classroom and at school (see references on the next page). For example, numerous studies have shown that opportunities to express preferences and make choices lead to greater motivation, academic gains, increases in productivity and on-task behavior, and decreases in aggressive behavior. Similarly, researchers report that student participation in goal setting leads to more positive outcomes (e.g., higher commitment to a goal and increased performance).

**If you didn't make so many rules,
there wouldn't be so many for me to break!**

Some Relevant References for Broadening Staff Understanding of Motivation

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Also, available at not cost from the Center, see:

Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School – http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagingandre-engagingstudents.pdf

Re-engaging Students in Learning – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/quicktraining/reengagingstudents.pdf

Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning: Classroom-Focused Enabling – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/cfe.pdf

Parent and Home Involvement in Schools – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/parenthome/parent1.pdf

The Parable of the Policy Making Owl

A field-mouse was lost in a dense wood, unable to find his way out. He came upon a wise old owl sitting in a tree.

"Please help me, wise old owl, how can I get out of this wood?" said the field-mouse.

"Easy," said the owl, "Fly out, as I do."

"But how can I fly?" asked the mouse.

The owl looked at him haughtily, sniffed disdainfully, and said: "Don't bother me with the details, I only decide the policy."

Moral: *Leadership involves providing details.*

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Join the *District and State Collaborative Network for Developing Comprehensive Systems for Learning Support –*

The network is for those interested in sharing prototypes, processes, and lessons learned related to pursuing new directions for student and learning supports. Our Center is facilitating the work of the collaborative. Sharing will be done through internet mechanisms (e.g., individual emails, listservs, websites), phone and possibly video or skype discussion sessions, and in person meetings as feasible. We anticipate that the Center's collaboration with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and Scholastic will be helpful in achieving all this.

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