Dropout Prevention

A s the true dropout figures emerge across the nation, the crisis nature of the problem is apparent. Recent reports indicate 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, et al., 2008). The data confirm that in far too many school districts a majority of students do not have sufficient learning supports to enable them to succeed at school and will not graduate.

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 do not finish 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.

It should be clear to everyone that schools experiencing the most problems are the ones most in need of a school improvement process that not only directly improves instruction, but also includes strategies for developing *a comprehensive system of student/learning supports* (see Exhibit on next page). Unfortunately, during the discussion of the impending reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), currently called *No Child Left Behind*, most of the proposals are limited to debates about standards and measures for academic accountability. Even those that go beyond this emphasis have not been broad enough to address what is needed to enable all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

At this time, every indication is that efforts to develop a comprehensive system of learning supports continue to be marginalized. As our Center stresses in various policy and practice reports, this is true for school improvement, in general, and for discussions related to reauthorizing the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, in particular. It is clear that the many specific agenda items currently competing for sparse resources tend to maintain the unsatisfactory status quo that characterizes the nation's efforts to address major barriers to learning, development, and teaching.

Thus, for many of us, the critical question at this juncture is how to coalesce strategically around a unifying concept. A united effort is the key to breaking through the policy barrier preventing an appropriate

exploration of what must happen so that all students truly have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

Dropout Prevention Resources

School staff and their community colleagues cannot wait for Congress to reauthorize the ESEA. So, we offer the following brief comments and some resources related to preventing student dropout.

- *Be proactive – prevent problems rather than wait for failure.* School factors can account for approximately two-thirds of the differences in mean school dropout rates. Available research suggests that being held back is the single strongest predictor of dropping out for both early and late dropouts. Data indicate that being held back one grade increases the risk of dropping out later by 40 to 50 percent, two grades by 90 percent. Below are resources that provide an overview on the topic of dropout prevention, including alternatives to retention.

  >See the Center's intro packet on dropouts
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/
  DropoutPrev/dropout.pdf
  >See: *Youth in Transition* –
  http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/hrsd/prc/
  publications/research/2002-000121/page00.shtml

Exhibit

Academics and Beyond: A Commitment to Equity of Opportunity

It is a given that a strong academic program is the foundation from which all other school interventions must operate. That is, 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.

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.

- *Rethink classroom and school-wide approaches to (a) enhance engaged, personalized learning and (b) provide students the learning supports they need to succeed.* For prevention to be effective, schools must *engage* all students in learning. Doing this involves practices based on understanding *intrinsic* motivation and that use classroom assessments that inform personalized intervention (e.g., response to intervention).

   Children at-risk need to be identified at a young age (as early as preschool). At every age interventions are needed to ensure students feel competent to succeed at school. Some need one-on-one support for a while. Special attention must be given to re-engaging those who have disengaged from classroom learning.

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

- *Enhance the professional development of teachers and support staff.* Ensure teachers have the knowledge and skills to ensure a wider range of students meet standards. Ensure that support staff know how to team with teachers in the classroom to rethink engagement, personalized intervention, and special assistance.

   >See *Preparing All Education Personnel to Address Barriers to Learning & Teaching*
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/preparingall.pdf

- *Provide out-of-school opportunities.* Efforts using out-of-school opportunities to retain middle and high school students begin early. They include tutoring, mentoring, service learning, career advising, and more. When older students (including potential dropouts) work with younger ones, both can improve their literacy skills.

   Service learning, for example, integrates community service into the academic curriculum. Investigators have found that when rigorous study in academic disciplines is linked to serious work on real needs, students' motivation to learn increases. When teachers are rigorous about partnering with young people to design and carry out service-learning projects that are tied to curricular objectives and standards, there are academic, intellectual, civic, ethical, social, and personal benefits.

   >See Quick Find on *After-school Programs*
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/afterschool.htm

- *Offer multiple pathways.* Students need alternative career and vocational pathways that reflect high standards. The concept of multiple pathways focuses on ensuring choice among a variety of high school programs that prepare all students for both college and careers. The emphasis is on providing both academic and career foundations for advanced learning, training, and effective and responsible participation in society. Available choices reflect student interests and community strengths and opportunities. They include programs that provide real world training in areas where graduates can apply for living-wage jobs.

   >See *Multiple Perspectives on Multiple Pathways*
     http://www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/mp/index.html

- *Introduce non-traditional approaches.* Educational alternative programs provide a non-traditional approach to curriculum by utilizing alternative teaching strategies. Programs focus upon the needs and interests of students by offering positive school experiences, which are geared for achievement, enhancement of positive self-concept, motivation, reduction of truancy, and reduction of disruptive behavior.

   >See Quick Find on *Alternative Schools and Alternative Education*
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/altschool.htm
   >See Quick Find on *Classroom-Enabling*
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/classenable.htm

Concluding Comments

Policy makers are revisiting the problem of preventing school dropouts. Ultimately, as with so many problems in our society, decreasing the rate of dropouts could be tremendously aided by reducing generational poverty. For the immediate future, however, the best opportunity to do something on a large-scale is tied to the impending reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*

In the meantime, individual schools will continue to do what they can. However, as Russell Rumberger sagely notes: Dropping out

is "more of a process than an event ... and there are a lot of telltale signs along the way. It means there are a lot of places in the child's school career where we could intervene to help. It really is going to take some systemic change. Anything short of that is not going to be that successful." In this respect, we are reminded of John Maynard Keynes' insight that the hardest part of changing the course of any enterprise is escaping old ideas.

Note: In September 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released a practice guide on *Dropout Prevention*. This is one of a set of practice guides designed to provide practical recommendations to help address the everyday challenges faced in classrooms and schools. Developed by a panel of nationally recognized experts, practice guides consist of actionable recommendations, strategies for overcoming potential roadblocks, and an indication of the strength of evidence supporting each recommendation. The Department states that each practice guide is subjected to rigorous external peer review.

The *Dropout Prevention* guide provides recommendations that focus on reducing high school dropout rates. Strategies presented include identifying and advocating for at-risk students, implementing programs to improve behavior and social skills, and keeping students engaged in the school environment. Online at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/dp_pg_090308.pdf

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Need More?

For links to key references, empirically supported programs, and centers specializing in the topic and related topics, go to the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Dropout Prevention*. Online at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/dropout.html

For some quick facts on the impact of the dropout problem, see http://www.dropoutprevention.org/stats/quick_facts.htm

Other topics that may be helpful include:
>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
Access these by going to http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/ and clicking on Quick Find Search to get to the Quick Find drop down menu.

A Few Websites Dealing Directly with Dropout Prevention

http://www.dropoutprevention.org/ - National Dropout Prevention Centers
http://www.focusas.com/Dropouts.html - Focus Adolescent Services: Youth Who Drop Out
http://www.ed.gov/programs/dropout/index.html — School Dropout Prevention Program
http://www.schoolengagement.org/ — National Center for School Engagement
http://www.youthbuild.org/ — Youth Build USA

And, if you can't find something you need, contact us directly:
By email — Ltaylor@ucla.edu / Phone – (310) 825-3634

Some Related Reading

Adelman, H.S.& Taylor, L.(2006), *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Belfield, C. & Levin, H. (2007). *The price we pay: Economic and social consequences of inadequate education.* Brookings Institution Press. http://www.brookings.edu/press/Books/2007/pricewepay.aspx

Bridgeland, J.M., DiIulio, Jr. J.J., & Morison, K.B., (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts.* Washington, D.C.: Civic Enterprises. Online at http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/thesilentepidemic3-06final.pdf

Deci*, E. L., &* Ryan*, R. M. (1985). Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior.* New York: Plenum.

Dounay, J. (2008). Beyond the GED: State strategies to help former dropouts earn a high school diploma. Policy Brief, Education Commission of the States. http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/78/47/7847.pdf

Dynarski, M., Clarke, L., Cobb, B., Finn, J., Rumberger, R., & Smink, J. (2008). *Dropout prevention: A practice guide.* Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/dp_pg_090308.pdf

Laird, J. Cataldi, E., KewalRamani, A. & Chapman, C. (2008). *Dropout and completion rates in the United States: 2006.* Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics. http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2008053

Orfield, G., Losen, D., Wald, J., & Swanson, C. (2004). *Losing out future: How minority youth are being left behind by the graduation rate cirisis.* http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=410936

Steinberg, A. & Almeida, C. (2004). *The dropout crisis: Promising approaches in prevention and recovery.* Boston: Jobs for the Future. http://www.jff.org/Documents/dropoutcrisis.pdf .

Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W., & Deci, E. (2006). Intrinsic versus extrinsic goal contents in self-determination theory: Another look at the quality of academic motivation. *Educational Psychology, 41,* 19-31.

Center Documents Relevant to Improving Schools to Prevent Dropouts

>*School Improvement? . . . fully addressing barriers to learning and teaching is the next step! –* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolimprovement.pdf

>*Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching –* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf

>*Frameworks for Systemic Transformation of Student and Learning Supports –* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/frameworksforsystemictransformation.pdf

>*Community Schools: Working Toward Institutional Transformation –* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/csinstitutionaltrans.pdf

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

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