Some Initial Findings from Alabama's Work on Enhancing Learning Supports

Excerpt from:

Obstacles Into Opportunities: A 90% High School Graduation Rate in Alabama by 2020 Provides the Educated Workforce That is Key to Expanding Our Economy

(Report prepared for the Business Education Alliance by the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama)
http://www.scribd.com/doc/235702358/Obstacles-Into-Opportunities

With respect to *breaking down barriers to learning*, the report states:

"We need schools, in partnership with communities, to keep kids enrolled, engaged, and academically on track. That means identifying problems and addressing them before they lead to failure. This will require a particular focus on children from low-income families, who are at a higher risk for falling behind. . . .

Schools are developing learning supports teams that may include local nonprofit agencies, to identify and address problems before they lead to failure. In pursuit of Plan 2020, the State Department of Education is working to develop systematic cooperation among administrative, instructional, and support staffs in the schools to watch for and address these sorts of problems. School- and system-based learning supports teams that are part of this effort include teachers, administrators, counselors, nurses and social workers. They also may include representatives of local nonprofits, as well as social service and law enforcement agencies.

Academic problems can be precipitated by problems outside of school. Absences and discipline problems can be rooted in poor health and nutrition, transportation difficulty, or economic distress in families. In 2013, an initial ten school systems piloted this new approach, which grew out of research from the National Center for Mental Health in Schools, located at UCLA. Implementation work in Alabama is being supported by Scholastic, the educational publishing company.

The initial focus in the pilot schools was on bolstering attendance. Across Alabama, schools recorded 11 million days of absence over the course of the 2010-11 school year. When students aren't in school, they aren't making academic progress. Close to 200,000 students, more than a quarter of total statewide enrollment, had five or more or more unexcused absences, a danger sign for school failure. The learning supports teams in the pilot schools and systems addressed attendance at three levels: (1) strategies to increase attendance generally, among all students; (2) strategies to address students with higher than normal absence rates; and (3) strategies for students with chronic attendance problems. . . .

Schools engaged in the learning supports work moved from a punitive to a proactive model, acting at an early stage to address the individual student needs that were leading to school days missed. They partnered with mental health providers to offer services to troubled students. School officials contacted parents and offered help in addressing their particular situation

The results were impressive. . . . Schools participating in the pilot saw a 25 percent decrease in absences over the previous year. That decrease represents a total of 110,000 avoided absences, meaning students in those schools received that many more days of instruction.

A second group with thirty school systems is adopting the learning supports model this fall. The State Superintendent has set a goal of having all systems trained in the approach in five years. A description of the philosophy behind the learning supports system and how it is implemented in schools can be found online at http://web.alsde.edu/general/ALDOEDesignDocument.pdf .

Conclusions

- Ensure the diffusion of the learning supports approach to all schools and systems. The State Department of Education should continue to pursue the pilot learning supports work and facilitate the diffusion of this approach to all schools and school systems in the state.

- Organize community resources to work in concert with schools. The State Department should facilitate the establishment of partnerships between schools and community organizations as part of the learning supports approach, encouraging both school officials and community groups to come together around a common agenda to establish learning supports for at-risk students and their families. Toward this end, the Department has requested in recent years, but never received, an appropriation of $3.5 million for grants to community organizations to engage them in work with the schools on learning supports issues.

- Provide state funding support for at-risk student programs. ... In its FY 2015 budget request, the Department requested an additional $12 million for the at-risk student allocation, which has received $20 million in recent years. This would have brought the appropriation to $32 million in total, restoring the grants back to the statutory standard of $100 for each at-risk student in a school. The budget was approved at the existing level of $20 million. This funding needs to be provided as a key ingredient for achieving a 90-percent graduation rate.