

# STRATEGIES TO HELP SOLVE OUR SCHOOL DROPOUT PROBLEM

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## Part III: Early Interventions

Evidence has shown that there is a need to identify those early factors in a child's life that place a child at risk. Although focus on family involvement, early childhood education, and reading and writing begins when children are young, they continue throughout a student's development.

### Five Steps of a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan

Though it is beyond the scope of this book to explore the details of implementing a comprehensive school improvement plan, a brief outline may be useful. These are the five basic steps in a school improvement planning process:

1. Identify district, school, and program priorities
  - Establish consensus of all parties on district vision and priorities
  - Determine program goals and expectations
  - Affirm district commitment to participate and support the process
2. Assess needs of current program
  - Define programs and target problem areas requiring needs assessment data
  - Develop data collection plan, and collect data from multiple sources
  - Organize and analyze information
  - Determine strengths and weaknesses of current policies and practices
  - Prioritize program improvement areas to be addressed
3. Select program improvements
  - Create selection criteria for proposed new program improvement products or practices
  - Identify and study the merits of new or revised policies, products, or practices
  - Prioritize and select the program improvements to be implemented
4. Implement changes
  - Develop an implementation plan reflecting facilities, equipment, and personnel needs
  - Establish costs, time lines, and persons responsible for specific implementation tasks
  - Initiate new program improvements and provide maintenance and monitoring procedures to ensure success
5. Monitor and evaluate processes and programs
  - Develop an evaluation plan for existing and new program improvements

- Initiate evaluation design and data collection procedures
- Analyze formative evaluation data of ongoing program revisions
- Analyze summative data for program impact data
- Prepare report for decision makers and other groups interested in the effectiveness of the new program improvements
- Continue the school improvement planning process

In summary, a comprehensive school improvement plan developed for a given time period is part of an ongoing cycle that should become part of the culture of a successful school. Educational leaders seeking to keep students in school, to improve academic performance, and increase graduation rates, must master this planning process.

### **The Fifteen Most Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention**

How do local educational leaders determine which of the multitude reform models, curriculum initiatives, administrative structures, or other school improvement practices are the very best for their local needs? We recommend that local leadership teams, with the assistance of outside resource organizations, thoroughly review as much information as possible from many different sources and then make program improvement decisions based on local priorities and the resources available.

One valuable resource organization is the National Dropout Prevention Center, which has been studying the issue of school dropouts since 1986. The Center has focused on identifying model dropout prevention programs and successful practices in representative schools and communities from across the nation.

From experiences with demonstration projects in all types of schools across the nation, the Center has observed a close relationship among model programs, outstanding schools, good administrative leadership, excellent teaching practices, and effective strategies for dropout prevention programs. They all seem to add up to higher student achievement levels and increased high school graduation rates. Hence, effective strategies for dropout prevention programs become basic components of a comprehensive school improvement program, and vice versa.

Based on this research, we have identified fifteen effective strategies that have the most positive impact on the dropout rate. These strategies, although apparently discrete, work well together and frequently overlap. They produce good results as stand-alone programs (for example, mentoring or family involvement projects), but when school districts develop a program improvement plan that encompasses most or all of these strategies, the benefits are more than additive. The greater the number of these strategies the school improvement plan incorporates, the greater the likelihood of an increased graduation rate. These strategies have yielded success in rural, suburban, and urban schools and at all school levels from kindergarten to twelfth grade.

These fifteen strategies lie at the heart of efforts to solve our school dropout problem. We offer a brief overview here. In the following chapters, we describe the individual strategies in greater detail, provide examples of programs that have implemented them successfully, and list resources and references for further information and assistance.

#### **Early Interventions**

A thorough review of needs assessments and comprehensive planning processes in local schools indicates that most school improvement programs should begin with a comprehensive family involvement initiative, a solid early childhood education program, and a strong reading and writing program. When this common core of program strategies is in place, particularly at the elementary level, districts can go on to determine the need for additional strategies.

***Family Involvement.*** Research consistently finds that family involvement has a direct, positive effect on children's achievement and is the most accurate predictor of a student's success in school.

***Early Childhood Education.*** Birth-to-three interventions demonstrate that providing a child additional enrichment can modify IQ. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who

will ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of their school experience.

**Reading and Writing Programs.** Because reading and writing are the foundation for effective learning in almost every subject taught in school, programs to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills yield benefits that support all other strategies for dropout prevention.

### **The Basic Core Strategies**

Four key strategies complement and supplement the common-core programs. Each of these strategies has the capacity to enhance relevancy and generate excitement in the learning process, both within and beyond the normal school environment. These strategies promote opportunities for the student to form bonding relationships with adult role models and to engage in learning opportunities that extend beyond the school day and the normal 180-day school year. Individually or collectively, these four potent strategies will have a significant impact with the low-performing students who are so often difficult to engage within the normal school setting or in typical classroom activities.

**Mentoring/Tutoring.** Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity focuses on academics and is an effective way to address specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies.

**Service Learning.** Service learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching/learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels.

**Alternative Schooling.** Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs paying special attention to the students' individual social needs and the academic requirements for a high school diploma.

**Out-of-School Enhancement.** Many schools provide after school and summer enhancement programs that eliminate information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure.

### **Making the Most of Instruction**

No sustained and comprehensive effort to keep students in school can afford to ignore what happens in the classroom. Strategies that produce better teachers, expand teaching methods to accommodate a range of learning styles, take advantage of today's cornucopia of technological resources, and meet the individual needs of each student can yield substantial benefits.

**Professional Development.** Teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need to feel supported and need to have an avenue by which they continue to develop skills and techniques, and learn about innovative strategies.

**Openness to Diverse Learning Styles and Multiple Intelligences.** When educators show students that there are different ways to learn, students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners.

**Instructional Technologies.** Technology offers some of the best opportunities for delivering instruction that engages students in authentic learning, addresses multiple intelligences, and adapts to students' learning styles.

**Individualized Learning.** A customized individual learning program for each student allows teachers flexibility with the instructional program and extracurricular activities.

### **Making the Most of the Wider Community**

Students who come to school bring traces of a wider community; when students leave school, either before or after graduation, they return to that community. It's impossible to isolate "school" within the walls of the school building. Effective efforts to keep students in school take advantage of these links

with the wider community.

**Systemic Renewal.** Systemic renewal calls for a continuing process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners.

**Community Collaboration.** When all groups in a community provide collective support to the school, a strong infrastructure sustains a caring environment where youth can thrive and achieve.

**Career Education and Workforce Readiness.** A quality guidance program is essential for all students. School-to-work programs recognize that youth need specific to prepare them for the larger demands of today's workplace.

**Conflict Resolution and Violence Prevention.** A comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, must deal with potential violence as well as crisis management. Violence prevention means providing daily experiences at all grade levels that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students.

### CONCLUSION

Professional educators and community leaders who work with children and youth have long recognized the need for effective strategies for dropout prevention. Business leaders and policymakers at the local, state, and national level bring another perspective to the problem. Many years of observation and research have yielded a solid list of strategies that work. When thoughtfully implemented in a comprehensive school improvement plan, these fifteen strategies can help to solve our school dropout problem.

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