

Teachable Moment

Overview of Practices to Promote High School Graduation

The WCPSS graduation rate for 2006-07 was 78.8% (Haynie, 2008). Although this is higher than the state rate and national projections of 70%, the WCPSS vision is that all students will graduate on time, prepared for the future. Research literature suggests that these practices can increase graduation rates:

- For all students (particularly 9th graders): strategies to improve rigor, relevance, and relationships;
- For 9th graders: transition activities, personalization, and academic support strategies;
- For struggling students: accurate identification and intensive instructional, monitoring and counseling support; and
- For teachers: intensive training to help them provide effective instruction and support, particularly for students showing signs of risk.

This brief newsletter and a longer bulletin are based on a literature review prepared by Jan Donley under contract to the Department of Evaluation and Research in Summer 2008. Basic trends are provided here, but readers are encouraged to read the full, longer bulletin for more detail on programs and strategies (Baenen, 2008).

Prevention

Research on both high school reform and dropout prevention is relevant to increasing graduation rates. However, it is important to remember that students can drop out more than once, but can graduate only once. A national study of high school dropouts asked students why they left school without graduating, and what might have helped them stay in school (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morrison, 2006). About one third of the students left school primarily because of significant academic challenges, but the majority left in good standing and 70% were confident they could have graduated if they had tried. Major reasons for dropping out *other* than academic challenges were that:

- classes were not interesting,
- they were not inspired to work hard, or

- they had personal reasons such as getting a job or becoming a parent.

Most indicated they would have worked harder if more had been expected of them, and that they had one hour or less of homework each day. Of those who left because of academic challenges, 30% reported they could not keep up with their courses, and 43% missed too many days to catch up.

When asked what might have helped them stay in school, dropouts suggested:

- Improved teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and help them see connections between school and work (81%).
- Smaller class sizes (75%) along with more academic support through tutoring, summer school and extra time with teachers (70%).
- More supervision in school (70%) and safer schools (57%).
- A stronger relationship with someone in the school who could help with problems (only 56% reported having this connection).
- Improved parent/school communication (71%).

Research has shown that school factors matter at least as much as individual student characteristics in dropout prevention.

- Schools with high levels of “holding power” for students generally provide supportive environments and challenging, engaging and relevant curricula.
- Ninth graders in general also need special attention as they transition from middle to high school. As students get used to a larger academic setting and higher demands from coursework, even high achieving 8th graders can fall off track to graduation. Ninth grade traditionally has the highest dropout numbers. Transition activities as well as enhanced advisories can increase grades and reduce dropout rates.



- High school reform research generally supports rigor, relevance, and relationships as critical to student success (e.g., Educational Research Service, 2005). Career Academies, for instance, employ school-within-a-school structures, integrated academic and vocational curriculum, and exposure to careers through business partnerships. Strong research on academies points to reduced drop out rates, improved attendance, increased academic course-taking, and increased credits earned—especially for at-risk students (Kemple & Snipes, 2000).

Support for Struggling Students

Factors traditionally associated with being “at-risk” (e.g., demographic background, family factors, having adult responsibilities, etc.) do not adequately target which individual students will drop out. Prediction accuracy can increase by considering warning signs related to academic engagement and academic performance (Jerald, 2007; American Youth Policy Forum Brief, 2008).

- Most dropouts show signs of disengagement (e.g., high absenteeism) and academic difficulty in middle grades and 9th grade (low GPA and fewer credits completed).
- Academic performance and engagement matter equally in predicting who will drop out and are interrelated. Students who are disengaged and not participating in school will be more likely to fail classes and not graduate.

Intensive, sustained, and well-targeted dropout prevention programs that specifically address students’ educational needs and academic performance can be successful at reducing high dropout rates for at-risk youth. One example is Check and Connect, in which a monitor frequently checks on student engagement and learning and follows up with individualized interventions (Jerald, 2007).

It will likely take multiple efforts to help struggling students graduate from high school on time with their peers (Jerald, 2007). Teachers require intensive training in how to make coursework rigorous and relevant to students, as well as in how to support students appropriately to promote their success. Costs for these interventions may be relatively high initially. Long-term benefits to students and to society overall merit further study.

For more information

To learn more about promoting high school graduation and other evaluation and research issues, see the references below or contact Nancy Baenen at nbaenen1@wcpss.net. You may also visit E&R online at www.wcpss.net/evaluation-research.net.

References

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