

Characteristics of Exemplary Vocational Education Programs Designed to Prevent At-Risk Youth from Dropping Out

James M. Weber and Judith A. Sechler

The time for studying successful dropout prevention programs is overdue. Although little progress has been made in combatting the dropout problem nationally, a number of local programs, that link vocational education and related work experience with other critical components appear to be working.

We reviewed the operational and organizational characteristics of nine such exemplary programs nominated by their respective state departments of education (Weber 1986). The programs represent different geographical areas and size school districts and diverse procedural strategies and student groups, but they share several characteristics, which are common as well to similar programs noted in other recent studies (e.g., Freeland 1986, Urban School Districts' Task Force on Dropouts 1985, Hodgkinson 1985, and Wehlage and Rutter 1984).

1. General organization

- Programs are presented in contexts that differ from a "traditional" school environment, and they function somewhat autonomously.
- Classrooms have low teacher-pupil ratios.
- Approaches tend to be holistic and multifaceted.
- Strategies are defined by a combination of remedial basic skills, parental involvement, work experience/job placement, counseling, supportive services, and vocational (skill) training.
- Programs focus on students who are in the beginning stages of their high school careers.

2. Staffing

- "Special" staff teachers are committed to their program's philosophy and goals.
- Teachers are able and willing to establish relationships with students that tend to be more demanding than "normal."
- Staff are flexible in their approach and able to stay on top of their students' needs.

3. Instruction

- Teachers devote about half of their efforts to addressing students' remediation needs (especially in basic skills); about one-fourth to resolving their personal needs (e.g., improved self-concepts); and one-fourth to addressing their work-related needs.
- Staff use pervasive motivational strategies (e.g., tying school activities directly to the real world and building esprit de corps among the participants).
- Instruction involves some degree of individualized teaching and learning.

References

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—James M. Weber is Senior Research Specialist, and Judith A. Sechler is Program Associate, both at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, The Ohio State University, 1960 Kenny Rd., Columbus, OH 43210.

high schools experience a high degree of isolation physically, psychologically, and professionally during most of their teaching. In contrast, this model seeks to avoid the isolation of the single classroom with its rotating groups of students as well as the isolation of teachers with a group of at-risk

students. Thus the model is most effective when there is a single complex of facilities, even if it is only a single large room, within which both teachers and students spend time. Such facilities promote collegiality through frequent face-to-face interactions. They stimulate cooperative relationships that

make teaching more enjoyable, stimulating, and professionally rewarding.

Student culture. The model is also set up to build a student culture with certain characteristics. First, the program is voluntary and students need to apply for admission. Not all candidates are accepted. One criterion of admission is the applicant's willingness to be candid about why he or she is in trouble with the school and to admit that a change in attitude and behavior is necessary for future success.

The program, seen as a fresh start, requires commitment from the students. They must commit themselves to a set of rules, work expectations, and standards of behavior. Clear rules about attendance, the quantity and quality of work required, and the consequences for breaking rules need to be spelled out in detail. The model assumes that not everyone can or will make an explicit commitment to such rules. For those who cannot make the initial commitment, admission is denied. Those who persistently fail to keep their commitment are terminated from the program. Dropouts from the dropout-prevention program need to be tolerated. This selectivity factor builds a program image based on standards and excellence. Such standards allow students to take pride in their program and their accomplishments.

Once students accept program requirements and goals, discipline problems can be expected to decline. A positive student culture can result in peer-monitored behavior because students will see that an effective program is in their best interest. Thus, the model creates a "family" atmosphere in which sharing and communication are stressed as ways to help members of the group deal with their problems. Within this atmosphere are clear rules that all students need to observe if they are to maintain their membership in the program. Students commit to important ethical rules such as not stealing from the group or committing any act of violence against a group member.

Curriculum. The model assumes that curriculum and teaching must be substantially different, at least in certain respects, from that which is ordinarily found in high schools. Individualization, clear objectives, prompt

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