

Reaching for Results

Schools Strive to Keep At-Risk Students from Dropping Out

by John Franklin

As scrutiny of high school graduation rates and achievement scores increases under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, educators are searching for better ways to reach at-risk students and lower their schools' dropout rates. Despite the public focus on cold, hard numbers, administrators are struggling to keep their attention on the warm bodies—their individual students—as they seek to reach NCLB targets for adequate yearly progress.

“We're working aggressively” to identify at-risk kids and to reach them, says Jim McCormick, superintendent of Lynchburg City Schools in Lynchburg, Va. “We want to do everything that we can to help these kids.”

During this time of high expectations and tight budgets, educators say the key to raising student achievement lies not in following existing frameworks and processes but in creating new and assertive programs. These solutions, they say, identify students' problems early and do not permit them, their parents, their teachers, or their principals to give up.

Spotting Trouble Signs

The key to raising student achievement, educational experts assert, lies in fixing problems early before they become more pronounced. This approach requires school staff members to identify at-risk students and get them the help they need before they fall behind. “When you look at why kids [fail], a lot of it has to do with their early education,” says Jay Smink, the executive director of the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University in Clemson, S.C. “A lot of kids drop out because of academic failure, which translates as reading difficulties. If a student can't read, he or she is likely to be held back—and 40 percent of kids who are held back eventually drop out.” That number rises to 90 percent, Smink says, if a student is held back again, because “that's when the student is overage, oversized, and doesn't fit in.” By identifying literacy problems early, he and others say, students who would eventually be at-risk can get a stronger start in their education. That, in turn, lessens the likelihood that the students' problems will worsen as they advance from grade to grade.

But what about students who do not receive the help that they need or whose problems are not diagnosed early enough? Once again, educators say, teachers and principals must find



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alternatives rather than give up. "If a student is having attendance or anxiety problems, criminal problems, or just can't cope in the regular school setting, we have extensive alternative programs that support their needs," says McCormick.

The Lynchburg district's Pride Center, for example, serves between 140 and 175 students a year for grades 8–12 and provides these struggling students with educational opportunities outside the typical school environment. "We also have the Middle School Learning Center for kids who have behavior problems in 6th and 7th grades, and we have the Homebound Learning Center as well," says McCormick.

Students who have missed more than 12 days of school in a year or who have sustained long-term suspensions as a result of reportable offenses or serious behavioral situations, for example, are served by the Pride Center. In certain cases, the homebound center offers software programs and online courses to help meet the needs of individual students. Older students can balance schooling with work experience so that they can get work-study credit, according to McCormick. "We also refer students to the Virginia Baptist Hospital's Assessment Center for support in the areas of anger management or drug rehabilitation," he adds. Without such programs, McCormick says, "we would have higher dropout numbers than we do."

Helping Hands

Other alternatives are available when schools inherit students who, for one reason or another, did not receive the help they needed earlier in their education and who are now in danger of being left behind. In these situations, educators looking for a helping hand sometimes turn to a veteran educator in the community.

"In our state, we sometimes have what we call HSEs assigned to schools that are struggling," says Joe Burks, assistant superintendent for Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Ky. HSE stands for highly skilled educator. "This can be a retired principal or teacher who has gone through multiple levels of training and who has extensive experience in the school system," Burks says.

The HSE works closely with school principals and teachers to examine the curriculum, instructional practices, learning environments for struggling students, and school efficiency measures. "Sometimes, the teachers are good and the kids are good, but the core content needs work or is overlapping in some places," Burks continues. "It's all about having a good plan in place that helps people prioritize."

Other school systems are working not only to help students who are at risk but also to encourage those who have left school to return and finish their education. The Houston Independent School District, for example, is organizing a program to reach out to students as soon as they disengage from school and stop attending classes. Each high school will develop a student monitoring and recovery plan that includes provisions for educators to visit students' homes to gain insight and offer support.

In Jefferson County, Ky., school officials must complete a three-tier process before they allow a student to completely withdraw from school. When a student first drops out, for example,

school officials are required to complete forms within three months indicating the student's dropout status and to personally interview the student and the parents within the first year to identify strategies for getting the student back in school. Before a full year passes, the officials must also have contacted the student and the parents once again to make one more effort to reach out and determine if the student can be convinced to return to school. "We have to work with every kid to find every possible way of reaching them," says Burks. "Every kid counts now."

A Personal Approach

Although early interventions and prevention programs can help keep some students in school, educational experts say, alienated students cannot realistically be expected to remain in school until someone shows enough interest in them to make them want to succeed. "When we ask students who drop out why they left school, the answer they invariably give is that no one cared whether they stayed or left," says Smink. Such beliefs may not necessarily be accurate, he says, but to the student, perception can be reality. That perception can make all the difference when the student is struggling.

For these students, encouragement from parents and community members can help them reconnect with school, according to information on the National Dropout Prevention Center's Web site ([http://www.ndpc.org](#)). Naturally, well-educated students will in turn help the community prosper. "People need to remember that when a student drops out, it's not a school issue; it's a community issue," Smink says. "That student is part of that community, and people need to think and act differently if they're going to make a difference."

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