

News notes

May 2008

Volume 3 Issue 10

There are, within this letter, the names of several staff who will receive awards for their outstanding performance this year. These are teachers who have really understood the meaning of specialized instruction for students. They have designed programs and or given the extra time needed to help students learn. They are cooperative and open to suggestion about improving learning for students. They have stuck through the tough times with the TACT team, with me, and with the families to get to the bottom of issues and help their students. They supervise para staff well. They make sure para staff get training. They get their paper work in on time and in good order. They are positive with other staff. They get the training needed to change. Good luck finding their names as I have hidden names within articles. To those who find their names: please contact Margo for details about your reward.

What is happening in quality programs?

JOANN EVANS ELP: “My high school girls and I have started a program we call Wishing Well, based loosely on the Grant a Wish Foundation. We have spoken to all of the advisory bases and in three days have granted three wishes: we got utilities back, we got a new pair of size 15 shoes for a boy who is wearing shoes that have rubber bands to keep them on and got a painfully shy senior a date for prom. I have private donors lined up and if necessary will go to clubs to request funds. The donors are ordering Lou Martino the items themselves and shipping to me to avoid handling money or credit cards. The girls are incredible. Boys in my class are apathetic and I am making several run for STUCO next year. I signed several up to ring bells at Christmas for the Salvation Army. They squawked like I had just signed them up for four years in the army, but they did go. I am going to make a tape of me jawing at them to play when they leave for college.”

When students drop out of high school, the toll on the quality of their individual lives as well as on the prosperity and competitiveness of the communities where they live—and collectively across the nation—is significant.

About 1.3 million students did not graduate from United States high schools in 2004, costing more than \$325 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity (Alliance for Excellent

Education, 2007). Across the country, urban centers eager to draw businesses to their location are at a disadvantage if they cannot manage to provide a readily available skilled and educated workforce or a stable community unburdened by recurring cycles of poverty. A recent study of Philadelphia high school students, conducted by Ruth Curran Neild and Robert Balfanz (2006), found that for every five students working toward a high school diploma, three teenagers had dropped out. National statistics surrounding high school dropouts highlight the far-reaching extent of the problem:

- It is estimated that close to 30 percent of students who enter high school this year Theresa Fienen will not graduate in four years, while roughly half of all African American and Latino students entering high school will not graduate in four years (Greene & Winters, 2005).
 - The health of a high school dropout suffers dramatically. An average 45-year-old high school dropout is in worse health than a 65-year-old high school graduate. High school dropouts have a life expectancy that is nearly a decade shorter than high school graduates (Gibbons, 2006).
 - Because high school graduates are less likely to commit crimes, increasing the high school completion rate by just one percent for all men ages 20 to 60 would reduce costs in the criminal justice system by \$1.4 billion a year (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006).
 - Globally, the United States ranks 17th in high school graduation rates and 14th in college graduation rates among developed nations (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2006). Concurrently, about 90 percent of the fastest growing jobs will require some post-secondary education (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007).
- These statistics reveal that there are important moral, social, and economic imperatives for resolving to turn around the dropout crisis. Understanding the magnitude of the dropout

problem and the forces that impact the dropout rate is an important preliminary step to developing dropout prevention strategies. Excellent Education, 2007). The more than 12 million students who will drop out over the next decade will cost the nation about \$3 trillion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007).

WHO DROPS OUT WHEN

Researchers have discovered that to identify who is most likely to drop out, schools need to identify students who

- receive poor grades in core subjects,
- possess low attendance rates,
- fail to be promoted to the next grade, and
- are disengaged in the classroom.

These are considered better predictors of dropout than fixed status indicators such as gender, race, and poverty, although background factors are indeed often associated with dropout, including being born male, economically disadvantaged, African American, or Latino (Jerald, 2006; Rumberger, 2004).

A Focus on Ninth Grade

Paying attention to the key predictors during important transition years, such as ninth grade, is crucial for targeting resources for dropout prevention. The ninth grade is often considered a critical make-it or break-it year when students get on- or off-track to Barb Baker succeed in high school. More students fail ninth grade than any other high school grade, and a disproportionate number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out (Herlihy, 2007).

According to Neild and Balfanz (2006).

The Dropout Gap

A disproportionate number of minority students leave high school before graduating. Drop out is seen more in larger urban areas.

PREDICTING DROPOUT

Because schools and districts can now predict early on which students are most likely to drop out, they can also intervene to prevent dropout. Research has found that some of the behaviors students exhibit that are predictive of dropout include academic failure and disengagement (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). According to a study conducted by

Karl L. Alexander, a sociologist at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Md., the predictor that is most indicative of dropout is whether a student **has repeated a grade in elementary or middle school** (Viadero, 2006). Other research has noted that **most future dropouts can be predicted as early as 6th grade by studying academic and engagement issues** among these students in elementary and middle schools (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005). Many studies show a consensus around the four key predictors of dropout listed below:

- **Failure to be Promoted to the Next Grade Level**

According to another study, conducted by Karl Alexander, Doris Entwistle, and Carrie Horsey (1997), also of the Johns Hopkins University, **64 percent of students who had repeated a grade in elementary school and 63 percent of those who had been held back in middle school left school without a diploma.** Additionally, Neild and Balfanz's (2006) study of Philadelphia students determined that more than half of the city's dropouts are not promoted past the ninth or 10th grade but are 17 years old or older when they drop out, and have already spent some years attempting to graduate.

- **Failure of Core Academic Courses in Secondary School** Numerous studies include failure in core academic courses as another predictor of dropout (Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Balfanz & Herzog, 2005). Allensworth and Easton (2005) determined that **one key predictor of dropout for ninth grade is receiving more than one F (based on semester marks) in core academic subjects together with failing to be promoted to 10th grade.** This predictor is 85 percent successful in determining who will not graduate on time.
- **Excessive Absenteeism** Numerous studies point to absenteeism as a predictive factor regarding the probability that a student will eventually drop out (Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Because **absenteeism is considered one of the strongest predictors of course failure** (which in turn is associated with dropout),

studies show that it is important for schools to monitor rates so that they can intervene quickly. For instance, of the eighth graders in Philadelphia who attended school less than 80 percent of the time, 78 percent eventually dropped out (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Allensworth and Easton (2007) have linked even moderately poor attendance in the freshman year with eventual dropout. They conclude that information on absences is available early in the school year and might be the most practical indicator for identifying students for early interventions: In Chicago Public Schools (CPS), about 15 percent of first-time freshmen have extremely high absence rates, missing a month or more of classes each semester. These students have largely disengaged from school—they remain enrolled but have marginal attendance—and they have less than a 10 percent chance of graduating. However, it is not just extremely low attendance that is problematic. Even moderate levels of absences are a cause for concern. Just one to two weeks of absence per semester, which is typical for CPS freshmen, are associated with a substantially reduced probability of graduating. In the 2000-01 cohort, only 63 percent of students who missed about one week (five to nine days) graduated in four years, compared to 87 percent of those who missed less than one week. While attendance is key to predicting dropout, the research does not show consensus on what defines low attendance.

- **Other Signs of Disengagement** A lack of engagement with school is considered a precursor to dropout, and signs of disengagement perhaps provide the best window of opportunity to target resources for dropout prevention, particularly if students are not yet failing core coursework. Some studies include lack of attendance as an indication of disengagement, while others use classroom engagement scales and behavior marks—or

a combination—when gathering data to assess engagement (Finn, 2006). Students most often report school-related reasons for why they dropped out. Students leaving high school often cite a lack of motivation, boredom, an unchallenging atmosphere, and an overall lack of engagement in school as a reason to drop out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Often, disengagement leads to academic failure (Finn, 1993).

At-Risk Sixth Graders

A study conducted by Balfanz and Herzog (2005) in Philadelphia found Michelle Murray that more than half of sixth graders with the following three criteria eventually left school:

- attended school less than 80 percent of the time,
- received a poor final grade from their teachers in behavior, and
- were failing either math or English.

The study found problems with academic performance or engagement—but not both at the same time, suggesting that an off-track academic path and an off-track nonacademic track to dropout seemed to converge closer to high school. Attending to behavior challenges, engagement, and attendance with middle-grade students who are not failing coursework may be one key to reaching a group of students who may otherwise drop out later.

At-Risk Eighth Graders

One of the strongest predictors of dropout involves two eighth-grade factors: attending school less than 80 percent of the time (e.g., missing at least five weeks of school) and receiving a failing grade in math and/or English during eighth grade (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Eighth graders provide some of the same indications as sixth graders when they are moving along the dropout path. Researchers have developed an approach to identifying future dropouts that has an even higher rate of accuracy. Neild and Balfanz (2006) found: "Of those 8th graders who attended school less than 80 percent of the time, 78 percent became high school dropouts. Of those 8th graders who failed mathematics and/or English, 77 percent dropped out of high school. Importantly, gender, race, age, and test scores did not have the

strong predictive power of attendance and course failure."

At-Risk Ninth Graders

Findings from the Philadelphia study show that important indicators of at-risk ninth graders involved the following:

- attended less than 70 percent of the time,
- earned fewer than two credits, and/or
- were not promoted to 10th grade on time.

A ninth grader with just one of these characteristics had at least a 75 percent probability of dropping out of school. Being held back in ninth grade is considered the biggest risk factor for dropping out. Early dropouts (those who leave school in ninth or 10th grade) tend to have low grades in elementary school. They also experience a steep decline in attendance and grades during the transitions to middle grades and high school. Grouping ninth graders into interdisciplinary teams resulted in significantly lower dropout rates in Maryland (Kerr & Legters, 2004). High-yield risk factors in ninth grade dropouts have been identified in both Chicago and Philadelphia and include the following (Jerald, 2007):

- Sixth graders with poor attendance (less than 80 percent), a failing mark for classroom behavior, a failing grade in math or a failing grade in English had only a 10 percent chance of graduating within four years of entering high school and only a 20 percent chance of graduating a year late (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005).
- Eighth graders with poor attendance (less than 80 percent), a failing grade in math, or a failing grade in English had less than a 25 percent chance of graduating within eight years of entering high school (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).
- Among entering freshmen who had exhibited no eighth-grade risk factors, those who had very poor ninth-grade attendance (less than 70 percent), earned fewer than two credits during ninth grade, or did not earn promotion to 10th grade had only a one-in-four chance of earning a diploma within eight years (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).
- A student is considered on track at the end of ninth grade if he or she has accumulated enough course credits to earn promotion to 10th grade

while receiving no more than one F (based on semester marks) in core academic subjects. The indicator is 85 percent successful in predicting which members of the freshmen class will not graduate on time and nearly as good at predicting who will not graduate within five years. "On-track" students are more than 3.5 times more likely to graduate from high school in four years than students who are "off-track" (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). In terms of measurement, the on-track indicator criteria differ in two key ways. First, course failures are counted only for core courses, while credit accumulation includes all credit-bearing classes. Second, failures are counted by semester, while credit accumulation is measured in terms of full-year credits, with half credits given for each semester course. Thus, the on-track indicator combines two separate but related factors: number of credits earned, and number of F's in core subjects. According to Allensworth and Easton (2005), mid-semester grades can also provide important insight into whether students are on track. Allensworth and Easton have recently released a study that includes freshman year overall Grade Point Averages (GPAs)—as well as freshman year absences—as key predictors that allow schools to know sooner and with greater accuracy than their 2005 On-Track Indicator who will drop out if targeted interventions and supports are not offered. According to Allensworth and Easton's most recent findings, more than one-half of non-graduates can be identified by the end of the first semester by using either failure rates or absences: By the end of the first term, course grades and failure rates are slightly better predictors of graduation than attendance because they directly indicate whether students are making progress in their courses. These rates also provide more specific information to target programs for struggling students than the on-track indicator. GPA, in particular, provides information about who is likely to struggle in later years and is the best indicator for predicting non-graduates (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Later Years in High School

It is more difficult to predict who will drop out in the later grades and therefore more difficult to target them with supports (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

An effective system of credit recovery, second-chance schools, and alternative paths to graduation are important strategies to stem the dropout of students in 11th and 12th grade.

SOCIAL INDICATORS OF DROPOUT

Social indicators, such as behavior problems, are among the red flags that a student may be at risk for dropping out, especially when combined with other signs, such as repeating a grade and/or changing schools. Often, risk factors appear to be cumulative.

Abused and Neglected Students

About 70 percent of the students who had a substantiated case of abuse or neglect during the high school years, who had a foster care placement, or who had given birth within four years of starting high school, dropped out in Philadelphia (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). While it is evident that students will benefit from strong instructional programs, effective and high-quality teachers, and engaging and safe schools, many students who are failing to thrive in middle and high school need additional supports. The most at-risk students with multiple indicators for dropout are often located in the highest poverty areas in unstable home and community environments, and require more than academic, structural, and system wide interventions. Often these students require tiered and even intensive supports (National High School Center, 2007).

Additionally, extensive research suggests that parent involvement programs improve student academic achievement and enhance educational programs for youth; indeed, family involvement in learning has been identified as the single most important determinant of success for at-risk children and youth (Fruchter, Galletta, & White, 1992).

Behavior

Behavior marks given by middle school teachers are much better than suspensions at predicting which sixth graders would eventually drop out. Teachers typically assign sixth graders behavior marks consisting of "excellent," "satisfactory," or "unsatisfactory," which are averaged at the end of the year to determine a final mark. Sixth graders with poor behavior (earning an unsatisfactory final behavior mark) have a one in four chance of making it to the 12th grade on time. The researchers noted that student behavior, as well as attendance and effort, influence the likelihood that students will significantly improve their achievement levels during sixth through eighth grades.

Mobility

According to some studies, changing schools can be a challenge to high school completion, yet others have noted mobility can actually be beneficial to some students' chances of graduating, depending on when and why students change schools. Russell Rumberger (2002), of the University of California at Santa Barbara, has found that there is strong evidence that mobility during high school, as well as during elementary school, poses risks to graduating. A study by Robert Haveman and Barbara Wolfe (1994) similarly concluded that residential mobility reduced the chances of high school graduation even after controlling for a variety of family background variables. Christopher Swanson and Barbara Schneider (1999) also discovered that those who change schools are at risk of graduating in some instances; for example, those changing schools between grades eight and 10 were significantly more likely than non-mobile students to leave school before 10th grade. However, they determined that those who change schools in earlier grades are less likely to drop out during the last two years of high school than even non-mobile students.

CURRENT STATE OF DROPOUT DATA

Many schools assign self-reported dropouts with withdrawal codes such as General Education Diploma (GED), for example. Most of these

withdrawal codes in Philadelphia reveal that the students were over the compulsory school attendance age and were dropped from the rolls for nonattendance rather than voluntary withdrawal. However, because **most dropouts do not report that they are leaving**, the voluntary withdrawal code is underutilized (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

EARLY WARNING DATA SYSTEMS

Currently, there is no ready menu of proven strategies and interventions to select from that are designed to lessen the flow of dropouts, but there is general consensus among researchers that strategies need to be more targeted to reach specific grade levels or at-risk populations, as identified by the key dropout indicators.

Building Early Warning Systems

The first step in a proactive approach to stemming dropout is to build an early warning system designed to use accurate data to help target an appropriate mix of interventions for groups and individual students.

Jerald lists uses of student- and school-level information generated by such a system, including

- Risk factors by individual student,
- Aggregate risk factors by school and type of school,
- Rates of decline in academic achievement and engagement (as indicated by attendance and behavior),
- School-level outcomes (on track by grade, off-track recovery rates, and graduation rates), and
- System-wide analysis of student characteristics, risk factors, outcomes, and impact of interventions.

Each on-track indicator Nancy Sprage has different advantages; therefore, an effective monitoring system should be created to take advantage of each indicator at different points in the school year. Schools can start in the first quarter with monitoring and addressing absences, then address first-quarter failing grades by offering immediate support. As semester grades are posted, the creation of individual dropout strategies would be designed and used. The end of the year would show who is at high risk for dropping out, and one-on-one interventions could

then be intensified. Developing successful approaches to intervention requires dependable and accessible data, training on how to use those data, and regular information about how interventions are impacting students both in terms of academic performance and high school completion. Schools, districts, and states need the data capacity to allow them to prioritize and calibrate interventions to meet the needs of students, schools, and districts, respectively.

BEST PRACTICES

Upon establishing an early warning system, the work of matching student needs with the appropriate supports and interventions starts.

Once a school recognizes that institutional factors matter at least as much, and in some cases more, than individual factors, the school can undertake to change those areas in their control in order to exert more of a holding power and to use data to inform exactly how to go about making adjustments. Some of the best practice approaches undertaken by higher performing high schools with relatively low dropout include the following:

School Climate

Schools successful in dealing with dropout address overall school climate in order to facilitate student engagement, focus on easing the transition into high school, provide rigorous and relevant curriculum, help ensure K-12 alignment and alignment with state standards, implement meaningful professional development, and prepare students for rigor in a way that does not bore them.

Rigor

As high schools work to keep students enrolled, they also are endeavoring to enhance academic rigor to prepare students to meet the challenges of an information-based economy. Raising high school academic rigor and keeping students in school need not be mutually exclusive. Numerous high schools facing significant challenges have managed to introduce a high level of rigor and also keep students in school (National High School Center, 2006). Research shows that some key best practices at these schools also include

- Providing supports so that students stay on track to graduate;
- Extending learning time;
- Providing challenging learning opportunities, even in catch-up courses, so that students remain engaged;
- Aligning performance standards to college and career readiness; and
- Focusing on transitions from high school to college and careers as well as on transitions into high school

(Quint, 2006). Schools that offer fewer math courses below Algebra I reduced the odds of dropping out by 28 percent, and those that offer calculus reduced the odds by 55 percent (Lee & Burkham, 2000). High schools that offer a constrained curriculum in math have lower dropout rates (Lee & Burkham, 2000). Research indicates that a balance between relevance and rigor will result in even more students staying in school. Engaging and challenging catch-up courses for struggling ninth graders also reduce dropout rates (Jerald, 2006).

Effective Teachers

Highly qualified and effective teachers exert a strong influence on student success and, for this reason, remain a top priority for high schools. Ronald Ferguson (1991) noted that teacher expertise was the largest factor that explained the gap between African American and Caucasian student achievement (40 percent of the variation). Teachers who comprehend their subjects and understand strategies to reach all high school students are integral to keeping students in school. Low-performing students facing learning barriers stand to achieve at higher standards if they are taught by high quality teachers (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Haycock, 1998). It is important that at-risk students have access to effective teachers with a track record of success. A report from the National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools (2005) cites research indicating that if economically disadvantaged students are given successful, highly motivated, and experienced teachers, achievement gaps can be narrowed and even closed. However, for too many underperforming and at-risk schools, a large

number of teachers are unprepared, inexperienced, or less qualified than their peers in more successful schools. Too often the less experienced and qualified teachers are assigned to the schools with the most challenges, including high dropout rates.

Extended Learning Time

While extended learning time is seen as key, research on activities outside the regular school day have shown mixed findings regarding impact on graduation, with supplemental approaches—such as sporadic homework help and irregular counseling—having virtually no impact on dropout prevention (Orfield, 2004). Individual interventions must be more intensive (National High School Center, 2007).

DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Currently only eight programs have enough research behind them to merit inclusion in the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). Few programs have demonstrated positive (or potentially positive) effects. Those that do show positive or potentially positive effects include *Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success*, *Check & Connect*, [Margo has information on check and connect]. Many of the more successful dropout-prevention programs assign an adult to work with a small number of students (Balfanz & Legters, 2006). The more high intensity interventions with accelerated instruction for catch-up purposes and significant counseling features are considered more effective than the occasional tutoring typical in a lot of schools (Agodini & Dynarski, 2004). Challenging students and supporting students go hand-in-hand, and even the most struggling students need to feel that they are being pushed to learn and that teachers expect them to master rigorous content (Agodini & Dynarski, 2004).

Some Highlighted Features of Research-based Dropout Prevention Programs

The research-based *Check & Connect* intervention provides trained monitors to small groups of students. The monitors closely follow tardiness, absenteeism, behavioral referrals, and academic performance and meet with individual students each week, staying in touch with students' family

members about progress. These monitors follow students through the district from building to building and loop. The personalized attention often involves arranging for transportation and community services. *Check & Connect* tracks attendance from period to period and is so informed about students' needs that program leaders know who has trouble waking up on time and who needs help negotiating alternatives to out-of-school suspensions (Jerald, 2007). Intensive interventions such as *Check and Connect* can cut dropouts by as much as half, but they are even more effective when implemented with school wide reforms (Jerald, 2007). Interventions that have the capacity to be oriented around individual student needs, and that work in tandem with school wide interventions able to adjust around grade-level needs, hold promise as an effective combination.

Additional Supports: Wrap-around Services

Providing social services as early as possible can make a positive difference in the lives of students struggling to complete high school. According to the Neild and Balfanz, students involved with social service agencies, such as delinquent placement facilities or foster care, are often at elevated risk of dropping out. Additionally, 70 percent of young women who gave birth within four years of starting high school also left before graduating. It is therefore important that high schools and relevant social service agencies work together to reach and connect with at-risk youth. Cross-agency coordination is critical in bringing all available resources to bear on a student's chances of success. There are a myriad of available funding streams, legislation, and resources a community can and should align to meet the needs of high school-aged youth, in addition to education funds including (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004):

- **Health and Human Services:** Governmental programs and services under the Department of Health and Human Services can provide resources regarding Medicare, Healthy and Ready-to-Work programs, mental health, and protection and advocacy. Other

resources can be found within developmental disability councils.

- **Workforce Development:** Resources under this agency focus on training, employment programs, and service options for youth, including youth with disabilities. Examples of workforce development resources include such model programs as Job Corps and the opportunities available under the Workforce Investment Act. Other opportunities include those provided by employers, business associations, and labor unions.

- **Social Security:** Local Social Security Administration offices offer programs and services for youth receiving Social Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). These programs also offer resources that can be accessed and aligned to meet the transition needs of youth with disabilities.

- **Vocational Rehabilitation Services:** These agencies offer an array of services, including career guidance and counseling, vocational evaluation, vocational training, job placement and follow-up services.

I would like to take a moment to wish everyone who had a birthday in the last year a special Happy Birthday! I am a fairly social person and I miss groups getting together and "talking shop". Perhaps next years we'll schedule a few social events to see if some of you miss it too.

I look forward to seeing each of you next fall and want to hear about your vacations. As for me...I am doing a kindergarten trip this summer with a grandchild who will complete KG in a few days.

Thank you to Kevin and Julie for their tireless effort to support us while we serve the students of Tri-County 607.