

Recommendation **Three**

Dropout Prevention & Recovery

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**The
College
Completion
Agenda**
State
Policy Guide

Produced in Collaboration with:



NATIONAL CONFERENCE
of STATE LEGISLATURES

One

Provide a program of voluntary preschool education, universally available to children from low-income families

Two

Improve middle and high school college and career counseling

Three

Implement the best research-based dropout prevention programs

Four

Align the K–12 education system with international standards and college admission expectations

Five

Improve teacher quality and focus on recruitment and retention

Six

Clarify and simplify the admission process

Seven

Provide more need-based grant aid while simplifying and making financial aid processes more transparent

Eight

Keep college affordable

Nine

Dramatically increase college completion rates

Ten

Provide postsecondary opportunities as an essential element of adult education programs

Background

The social and economic costs of students not completing high school are staggering. More than 7,000 students leave school daily, according to the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. Annually, that adds up to about 1.3 million students who do not graduate from high school with their peers as scheduled. Unfortunately, for students from underserved groups, dropping out is very common. Although the national graduation rate was 69.2 percent for the class of 2006, only about half of African American, Latino and Native American students earned diplomas with their peers.

Students who drop out of school feel the effects the rest of their lives — as does the nation. Dropouts not only earn significantly less over the course of their working lives, but they also cost the nation billions of dollars in uninsured health care, lost tax revenue and crime-related costs. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, dropouts from the class of 2009 alone will cost the nation nearly \$335 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity over their lifetimes. In 2005, the average annual income was \$17,299 for a high school dropout and \$26,933 for a high school graduate. In addition, while the unemployment rate for individuals of all education levels has significantly increased since December 2007, high school dropouts face the most difficulty finding a job. In 2009, the Alliance for Excellent Education noted that, “According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts in July 2009 was 15.4 percent, compared to 9.4 percent for high school graduates, 7.9 percent for individuals with some college credits or an associate degree, and 4.7 percent for individuals with a bachelor’s degree or higher.”

These troubling statistics point to a widespread and systemic problem that requires the intervention of state leaders to promote proven practices to reduce dropout rates. This chapter identifies promising practices that states can use to increase high school graduation rates.

What Legislators Need to Know

Addressing a dropout problem requires having basic data about the extent of the problem and who are most severely affected. Legislators may want to seek answers to the following questions:

- What is the state graduation rate?
- What is the graduation rate for every school district in the state?
- How is the graduation rate calculated?
- What is the graduation rate for various populations (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity)?
- When are students dropping out (e.g., middle school, freshman, sophomore, junior or senior year)?
- What is the effect of high school dropouts on the state's economy?

Research

Research indicates that students who drop out of high school do so because of long-term dissatisfaction with education, sometimes beginning as early as middle school. As a result, legislators have increased efforts to improve the education experience for students from the middle grades through high school and beyond.

Although several policies are aimed at identifying and supporting struggling students — and bringing students who have already dropped out back into the system — another set of policies also aims at improving high school performance overall. Research indicates that high schools can better serve today's students by establishing different ways to graduate. Elements of such alternative routes include the ability to enroll in college-level classes while in high school — often in the form of dual enrollment — and career and technical education that lead to industry certification. Preliminary research indicates that students who start dual enrollment programs are less likely to drop out of high school even if they are considered to be at risk and are more likely to continue their college education at a postsecondary institution and graduate with a degree. Research also indicates that students who participate in high-quality career and technical education programs are less likely to drop out of high school, are more likely to improve their test scores, do better in the workforce and are more apt to pursue postsecondary education.

The most critical policy options revolve around identifying and supporting struggling students, and bringing students who have already dropped out back into the system.

Students need personal attention.

Personalized learning opportunities provide students with an opportunity to plan and prepare for life after high school and to understand how their schoolwork is related to postsecondary and career goals. Personalized learning means designing a blend of courses and experiences that match the needs and interests of each student. It includes mentoring along with an emphasis on career and academic planning.

Most students do not plan well for their futures, so one of the most important elements for middle and high school students is having guidance to take the right courses. According to a 2005 ACT report, *College Readiness Begins in Middle School*, one reason students are not planning properly is that they may not have adequate guidance from their schools. The report recommends that school districts set up a formal program, starting in middle school, to help students develop a college readiness plan.

Identification and support for struggling students is critical.

Years before dropouts actually leave high school, most send warning signals — some as early as sixth grade — that they are having trouble in school. Chronic early absenteeism in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade math and reading. Absenteeism and student academic struggles in the middle grades also can be found in data that school districts keep on their students.

Schools and districts have another opportunity to identify struggling students in the first year of high school. Research from a large-scale study of Chicago Public Schools found that two indicators — grades and school absences — are especially effective in predicting graduation. For example, almost all students with a “B” average or better at the end of their freshman year graduate, compared to only a quarter of those with a “D” average. Moreover, nearly 90 percent of freshmen who miss less than a week of school per semester graduate, regardless of their eighth-grade test scores. On the other hand, just one week of absence is associated with a much greater likelihood of failure — no matter whether students arrive at high school with top test scores or below average ones.

Dropout recovery programs help out-of-school youth reengage.

As adults, dropouts recognize the importance of a high school diploma. In a 2006 national poll of 16- to 25-year-old dropouts, 81 percent of the poll participants reported that graduating from high school is important to success in life; 74 percent reported that if they were able to relive the experience, they would stay in school; 76 percent said they would definitely or probably reenroll in a high school for people their age, if they could; and 47 percent said that not having a diploma makes it hard to find a good job. Research suggests that the most successful dropout recovery programs are flexible, link to postsecondary education and employment, and provide strong student support.



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State Policy Approaches

State lawmakers have been developing policies to reduce the dropout rate and increase student completion rates. Recent legislation on specific interventions and the potential cost is provided below:



Create statewide plans for dropout prevention.

Steps include:

- Gathering local and state data to demonstrate the extent of the problem;
- Analyzing the data to understand when and why students are dropping out, including evaluating transcripts and looking at key transitions from elementary to middle and middle to high school; and
- Conducting policy audits, including those relating to attendance, discipline, grading, retention, promotion, the awarding of GEDs and the use of alternative schools, to ensure that current policy is in line with statewide dropout prevention efforts.

Colorado, in 2009, created the Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement in the state Department of Education to collaborate with local education providers. The goals are to reduce the student dropout rate and increase the student graduation and completion rates. The office must develop a report of best practices for reducing the dropout rate and increasing student engagement. It will identify school districts with high dropout rates and provide assistance to them.



Help students develop individual learning plans, provide good student mentoring and train counselors on effective dropout prevention techniques.

States are increasingly focusing on dropout prevention in elementary and middle school. Techniques include requiring students to develop long-term education plans and investing in school counselors, adult advocates and mentors.

In 2006, **Georgia** appropriated funds for a graduation coach in each public high school to identify at-risk students and help them keep on track academically before they consider dropping out. In 2007, the legislature expanded the program to include middle schools.

South Carolina in 2005 began requiring career awareness counseling for students in sixth, seventh and eighth grades, during which they identify career interests and abilities. Eighth-grade students select a preferred cluster of study and develop an individual graduation plan in preparation for high school.

In 2007, **New Mexico** provided that, at the end of grades eight through eleven, each student must prepare an interim next-step plan for the course work remaining through high school graduation. Each year's plan must explain any differences from previous interim next-step plans and be signed by the student and the student's parent and the school counselor.

California established the Early Commitment to College Program in 2008. In grades six through nine, it requires schools to provide pupils the opportunity to sign a pledge declaring a commitment to finish high school and prepare for and enroll in, college. The bill also requires participating districts to provide college information and preparation events for pupils.

Identify and support struggling students.

State efforts involve early identification and support for struggling students to help them remain in school and graduate. Options include extending learning opportunities before or after the regular school day, on Saturday, and beyond the regular school year, and ensuring that dual enrollment and career/technical education opportunities are available to help students connect classroom learning with real-world experiences.

Since 2007, **Rhode Island** has required the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to work with school districts that have the lowest high school graduation rates. The goals are to incorporate progressive support and intervention with specific dropout prevention strategies and targeted resources. The department will develop or identify specific methods of targeted intervention for school districts with a dropout rate higher than 15 percent.



Medium Cost

Louisiana, in 2000, described the circumstances under which certain students may withdraw from school. The state requires an exit interview along with information regarding available training and employment opportunities. It also requires comprehensive coaching for middle school students who are below grade level in reading and math.

In 2008, **Washington** created extended learning opportunities to help students earn a high school diploma. It also provided extended learning and instructional support for English language learners, low-income students, students with learning disabilities and students in grades eleven and twelve who are not on track to graduate. Extended learning opportunities are before or after the regular school day, on Saturday or beyond the regular school year.



High Cost

Reengage out-of-school youth with dropout recovery programs.

These policies offer a safety net by providing dropouts with another chance to graduate. Options include allowing flexibility in the numbers of hours a day or the number of days a week a student attends classes; raising the maximum age at which a student is eligible for state funding to complete a high school diploma; and adding five- and six-year graduation rates to the four-year graduation rates included in school accountability and funding formulas.

Texas created the Optional Flexible School Day Program in 2006, providing an optional school day for students in grades nine through twelve who are dropouts or at risk of dropping out. The law allows school districts flexibility in the numbers of hours a day or the number of days a week a student attends classes. Also, in 2007, Texas authorized school districts to admit anyone between ages 21 and 26 who wants to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. The student's attendance qualifies the school for state funding.

In 2008, **California** added five-year and six-year graduation rates to the four-year graduation rates that are included within the academic performance index of schools and specifies how to calculate the new graduation rates.

Illinois established the Illinois Hope and Opportunity Pathways Through Education Program in 2009. The program will develop a comprehensive system to re-enroll more high school dropouts in programs that will enable them to earn a high school diploma. Programs can include year-round classes, summer school, evening courses and community college courses.

Take Action

1**Conduct a policy audit.**

Examine policies relating to attendance, discipline, grading, retention, promotion, the awarding of GEDs and alternative schools to ensure that current policies are in line with statewide dropout prevention efforts.

**Short-Term****2****Establish a statewide task force to build political will and develop a set of strategies to address dropouts.**

The task force can: (1) highlight the issue (i.e., its costs to the state, school districts and families); (2) identify behaviors and markers of students who are likely to drop out; (3) suggest effective ways to intervene; and (4) develop dropout prevention resources for schools, teachers and parents.

**Mid-Term****3****Analyze current data-collection procedures to identify accurate predictors of possible dropouts. Provide this information to policymakers, educators, parents and school counselors.**

Determine if the state collects “early warning” data that could help school districts identify students at high risk for dropping out, including those with absences and lower grades.

**Mid-Term****4****Work with youth agencies to share their data.**

Consider how state policy and funding can encourage accountability among different agencies that serve youth for keeping students on the path toward graduation.

**Long-Term**

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