

New Hampshire's Multi-Tiered Approach to Dropout Prevention

Many states and districts across the country struggle with designing and implementing coherent dropout prevention initiatives that promote academic advancement, especially for special needs students, who drop out at much higher rates than the general student population. New Hampshire has been recognized for its innovative use of data collection and analysis as the key to unlocking the dropout problem. As a function of the New Hampshire State Department of Education's implementation of a dropout prevention program model titled *Achievement in dropout Prevention and Excellence* (APEX II) which is made possible by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, participating high schools are developing dynamic data collection systems at the school level.

In New Hampshire, students may have numerous risk factors for dropping out, including status variables (e.g., they may live in poverty or have severe emotional disabilities) or alterable variables (e.g., they may have poor motivation and poor academic performance). However, all students are met with the expectation that they can get on track to graduate. The APEX II program is designed to reduce the state's dropout rate by 20% by 2009.

Accessible Data Systems

As part of the APEX II program (see <http://iod.unh.edu/projects/APEX.html>), data regarding tardiness, absences, office referrals for discipline problems (including detailed information about when, where, or why the behaviors occurred, as well as data on detentions and suspensions), and survey data from students and faculty about school culture and climate issues are among the detailed information collected. These data are made regularly and readily accessible to teachers and administrators on an ongoing basis, who then review it to identify signs that a student is at risk of dropping out, as well as to identify those students who actually do leave school. The information is used to inform plans of action for intervention at the school level, for groups of students, and for individual students with the most significant risks. As a starting point for connecting with at-risk students, the data are carefully analyzed to uncover root causes of disruptive or disengaged behaviors.

"Administrators are often afraid of opening up the data for scrutiny by staff—but without the data you cannot unlock the problem and solve it. Even small measures of informed prevention can make an enormous difference in keeping students with disabilities engaged. In many schools the data [are] all there, but . . . just not kept in a format you can use and analyze," said JoAnne Malloy, dropout project coordinator at the University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disabilities, a partner on the APEX II program.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

As part of a high school's overall dropout prevention strategy, teachers are trained in providing an improvement process called *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* (PBIS, see <http://www.pbis.org/main.htm>), which has been particularly effective in helping students with emotional and behavioral challenges stay on track and experience success (Sugai et al., 1999). When teachers are well trained in this approach, according to Ms. Malloy, the long-term cost to schools is not significant, but the positive impact on students with disabilities is particularly significant.

The PBIS approach defines appropriate student behaviors that create an overall positive school environment. A system of positive behavior support for all students within the school is implemented in areas including the classroom and other school settings, such as hallways and restrooms. Attention is focused on creating and sustaining primary (school-wide), secondary (group), and tertiary (individual) systems of support that improve lifestyle results and that reach beyond the classroom to include health, social, family, work, and recreational outcomes for all children and youth by making problem behavior less effective, efficient, and relevant – and desired behavior more functional.

Students with disabilities, such as those with emotional and behavioral problems, often benefit from the individual systems of support offered through PBIS within a wider context of the school-wide stated expectations. The success of this program depends on a school's willingness to sharpen its data collection and retrieval system so that teachers and administrators know who will benefit from which level of support, identify at-risk students at a very early point (before they have experienced multiple failures), and determine how support will be offered.

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—JoAnne Malloy, Dropout Project Coordinator, University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disabilities

Rehabilitation, Empowerment, Natural supports, Education and Work (RENEW)

For students who need even more intensive services to keep them from leaving school or to draw them back into school once they have dropped out, the New Hampshire approach uses teams formed for each student. The teams are trained to develop individualized, student-directed, school-to-career plans using an evidence-based practice called RENEW – Rehabilitation, Empowerment, Natural supports, Education and Work. Staff members at each high school and specialists from community-based organizations form the RENEW teams.

The decision to drop out of high school does not occur overnight, but it is often preceded by feelings that the student does not fit in at school and cannot benefit from what school has to offer. To connect with these students before they drop out, schools often need to look beyond the obvious indicators, such as absence and poor grades, and identify other factors pulling the student away from school, including personal challenges at home and low socio-economic status (Thurlow et al., 2002). Addressing individual students' most pressing concerns (e.g., through job counseling and health care service referrals) is just one of the ways schools can help keep more students coming back. Interventions in New Hampshire are designed to identify early the students who need these supports and to address improvements in a student's life both inside and outside the school building through mentoring, individualized pathways toward high school graduation, career/vocational activities, mental health support services, tutoring and home visits, and other approaches.

Achievement with APEX II

APEX II is designed to achieve five outcomes:

- Significantly reduce the dropout rate in high schools;
- Reduce suspension and expulsion rates through the implementation of a school-wide positive behavioral system, which incorporates students and parents in decision-making;
- Develop successful transition programs for at-risk 8th graders to ensure a successful shift to 9th grade and the high school climate;
- Provide successful and intensive school-to-career services for current dropouts, so they may have a chance to complete high school; and
- Expand the state's capacity to implement proven dropout prevention strategies by creating multiple avenues for comprehensive technical assistance and professional development opportunities.

Freshman Advisories, Behavioral Benchmarks, and Peer Interaction

Additional dropout prevention strategies that are emerging in New Hampshire's APEX II high schools include advisories for freshmen (to enhance transition and integration into the high school culture) and behavioral benchmarking and analysis for new students. Behavioral benchmarking and analysis assists teams of school administrators and specialists in developing successful interventions that rely on contextual and functional assessments of incoming students. Through a targeted level of support, these teams design 'function-based' interventions for individuals and groups of students – including incoming ninth graders – who exhibit difficult behavior or are deemed 'at risk' for school failure. The goals of these interventions are to reduce negative and problematic behaviors (and the consequences of such) in students, as well as to ensure a successful transition to high school (more information is provided on the project's Web site: <http://iod.unh.edu/projects/APEX.html>).

Coordinators of the APEX II dropout program recognize that peer interaction is often the most effective way to reach at-risk students. The program therefore involves peers in dropout prevention activities through a student leadership initiative led by Dr. William Preble from New England College. This piece of the APEX II model includes a student-led data collection and analysis activity, which sets the stage for enhancement of student voices on the PBIS Universal Teams. In conjunction with Main Street Academix, which helps recruit diverse groups of students to fill school leadership roles, students train as 'school climate' experts to assess the attitudes of their peers towards high school, and examine a variety of factors which influence a student's decision to drop out. Among the factors addressed are school violence and bullying, prejudice, discrimination, low academic achievement in relation to school climate, and adult/student communications and respect. Once this information has been collected, student leaders work collaboratively to better understand fellow students' needs and perceptions of high school and develop effective, data-driven action plans within their schools that address behavioral issues, dropout prevention, and school safety and climate.

Supporting Dropouts Who Return to High School

Additional project objectives include development of a support process for reentering high school students so that 50% or more of those who reenter attain academic success and complete their secondary education programs. This process reduces the rates and severity of behavioral problems by establishing and supporting the PBIS model in participating schools, as well as improving 10th-grade math and reading/language arts scores for all students at participating schools.

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<http://iod.unh.edu/projects/APEX.html>

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAM

HOW IT WORKS

The Dropout Prevention Program is primarily a grant program to state education agencies (SEAs) and local school districts to implement research-based, sustainable, and coordinated school dropout prevention and reentry programs. Grants are awarded competitively and used for activities such as professional development, reduction in student–teacher ratios, counseling and mentoring for at-risk students, and implementing comprehensive school reform models.

KEY REQUIREMENTS

SEAs and districts must implement research-based, instructional practices and other activities, and target funds to schools with annual dropout rates above their state average.

HOW PERFORMANCE IS MEASURED

SEAs and school districts must report dropout data disaggregated by race and ethnicity for schools receiving program funds.

KEY ACTIVITIES FOR SEAS

SEAs must:

- Report annually to the U.S. Department of Education on the status of implementation activities and on dropout rates, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, for students at schools assisted by the grant program. In addition, grantees must report annual school dropout rates for the 2 fiscal years prior to receiving funds under the grant.

For more information visit: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/dropout/index.html>

References

Sugai, G., Horner, R. H., Dunlap, G., Hierner, M., Lewis, T. J., Nelson, C. M., et al. (1999). *Applying positive behavioral support and functional behavioral assessment in schools*. Washington, DC: OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support.

Thurlow, M. L., Sinclair, M. F., & Johnson, D. R. (2002, June). Students with disabilities who drop out of school—Implications for policy and practice. *NCSET Issue Brief 1(2)*.

Additional Resources

Alliance for Community Supports: <http://allianceforcommunitysupports.com>

Council for Exceptional Children: <http://www.cec.sped.org>

Illinois PBIS Network: <http://www.pbisillinois.org/>

Institute on Disability: <http://www.iod.unh.edu>

Main Street Academix: <http://www.msanh.com>

National Dropout Prevention Center: <http://www.dropoutprevention.org>

Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health:
portlandrtc@pdx.edu

Southeastern Regional Education Service Center (SERESC): <http://www.seresc.net>

State of New Hampshire, Department of Education: <http://www.ed.state.nh.us>

Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS):
<http://www.pbis.org>