Promoting School Engagement for Struggling Students

Case Statement: Dropping out of high school is not an event, but rather a process that involves a number of complex and interrelated factors. For example, we can identify 50% of eventual dropouts as early as the sixth grade[1] and 80% by the ninth,[2] based on observable academic, attendance and behavior indicators. Furthermore, the first marking period of the ninth grade appears to be particularly important,[3] since it is a time when a group of young people who have not yet exhibited any dropout predictors begin to experience significant academic challenges. Beyond these objective factors, young people often complain that they don't understand why they need to master academic content, and that no one really cares whether or not they come to school.[4] Based on these and other findings, we are beginning to understand in more detail many of the factors that determine whether or not young people graduate, and how to frame interventions that can re-engage struggling students and get them back on track for graduation.

Research-Based Approaches that Promote Student Engagement:

- **Positive Adult Relationships.** Well-designed mentoring programs that produce caring relationships between adults and youth have positive impacts on a wide range of academic and social indicators.[5]

- **Summer transition programs**. Structured opportunities where students can learn about their new schools, meet their teachers and understand academic expectations, are effective strategies for easing the movement into 9th grade. Effective programs often include three components: *personalization*, *motivation* and *skill-building*; designed to help educators tackle the sources of failure among ninth graders and lay a firmer foundation for success in high school.[6]

- **Contextual learning.** Real-world learning opportunities may be effective in improving students' grades, attendance and graduation rates. In addition, applied learning holds promise for increasing student engagement – i.e. relevance to rigor - as well as access to postsecondary education.[7]

- **After-School Internships.** At-risk teens participating in paid internships after school missed fewer days of school than similar classmates, tended to fail fewer core academic courses, and had higher rates of graduation and lower dropout rates than similar students who did not participate.[8]

- **Connections to Employers and Work.** Structured employer-school connections provide access to employment networks, reduce the negative peer influence and offer meaningful adult relationships. These experiences can also help students to engage in new modes of thought and to consider career pathways previously unknown to them.[9]

- **Truancy Reduction Efforts.** Effective truancy reduction efforts focus on comprehensive approaches that build positive relationships among schools, communities, parents and students, leading to enhanced attendance, attachment and achievement.[10]

Related Efforts in Philadelphia…

- Thousands of youth are offered workplace internships each year through *WorkReady Philadelphia*, funded by employers, government and foundations.

- City-funded out-of-school time programs provide thousands of after-school and summer program slots.

- The School District of Philadelphia operates summer school programs for thousands of high school students each year.

- Truancy reduction efforts managed by the School District and the City's Department of Human Resources are currently under review to increase coordination and effectiveness.

[1] Balfanz, R. and Liza Herzog, 2005. *Keeping Middle Grades Students On Track to Graduation: Initial Analysis and Implications.* Presentation given at the second Regional Middle Grades Symposium. Philadelphia, PA.

[2] Neild, Ruth Curran and Robert Balfanz. 2006. *Unfulfulled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000-2005.* Philadelphia: Youth Transition Collaborative.

[3] Neild, Ruth Curran, et. al. "An Early Warning System." *Educational Leadership.* October 2007. Vol. 65. No. 2. pp. 28-33.

[4] Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project. Unpublished interviews with out-of-school youth, for the Philadelphia Youth Transitions Collaborative.

[5] Tierney, Joseph P. and Jeanne Baldwin Grossman. 1995. *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

[6] Legters, Nettie L. 2005. *What to Do About Those 9th Graders? Current Efforts, Future Questions.* Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organiation of Schools. Paper presented for "Research on Improving High Schools: A Forum for Advancing the Research Agenda," Washington, DC, May 5, 2005.

[7] Husbands, Jennifer and Stacy Beese. 2004. *Review of Selected High School Reform Strategies.* Aspen Meadows: Aspen Institute

[8] Goerge, Robert et. al. 2007. *After School Programs and Academic Impact: A Study of Chicago's After School Matters.* Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

[9] Lerman, Robert. 1996. *Helping Disconnected Youth by Improving Linkages Between High School and Careers.* Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

[10] National Center for School Engagement. *www.schoolengagemenet.org*