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SCHOOL CLIMATE AND DROPOUT PREVENTION

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Schools can support effective dropout prevention through the following promising strategies:

41. Address risk factors in the context of positive school climate.

42. Create conditions that support engagement of students and parents.

43. Participate in a continuing systemic process of evaluating goals and objectives as they impact a diverse group of learners.

44. Start early by engaging families and students, starting with early childhood education.

45. Provide unique learning opportunities to meet the needs of all learners.

Overview

School climate reform, an evidence-based strategy, supports K-12 students, school personnel, parents/guardians and community members learning and working together to promote prosocial education. Done well, these efforts will result in even safer, more supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and harmonious schools. The U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, President Obama's Bully Prevention Partnership, the US Departments of Justice and Education's School Discipline Consensus project, a growing number of State Departments of Education and foreign educational ministries support and/or endorse school climate renewal as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness, reduce high school dropout rates, prevent bullying and other forms of violence, and enhance teacher retention rates.

School Climate and Dropout Prevention

A positive school climate improves student achievement and a sense of belonging. This year, more than ever, school leaders need efficient, low-cost, and effective ways to boost school achievement. We know that important factors in a positive school climate are also significant mediators of learning: empowerment, authentic engagement, self-efficacy, and motivation. Being intentional in our practices and co-leading on nurturing a positive school climate is a strategy that pays off long term for youth, faculty, and school districts with stronger student achievement within a productive, safe learning environment—a good return on the investment of human and financial resources.

Developing and sustaining high-quality school climates is deeply tied to strategies emerging from dropout prevention research and work. This research conducted across several decades has revealed not only the at-risk factors most often associated with students who drop out, but also a broad range of strategies that, in combination, go a long way toward meeting the needs of students, particularly those at risk of dropping out. Interestingly enough, many of these strategies link tightly to the significant factors in positive school climates including connectedness, engagement, empowerment, and self-efficacy.

What are these risk factors that need to be addressed whenever possible to help ensure success for all students? The research-based risk factors for dropping out clearly show that there is no single cause, and therefore there is no single solution. Researchers have found that dropping out of school stems from a wide variety of factors in four areas or domains: individual, family, school, and community. According to Hammond, Linton, Smink, and Drew (2007), the research showed that in the individual domain, certain risk factors could be positively impacted by appropriate solutions. For example, students who are disengaged with school—evidenced by poor attendance, lack of effort, low educational expectations, low commitment to school, and lack of participation in extracurricular activities—are more likely to drop out. Yet, these are risk factors that can be addressed in the context of a positive school climate where, for example, the adults in the school collaborate and create a sense of belonging and where students are connected to the adults and are made to feel included and valued. Another risk factor—parenthood—can be impacted by the adults in the school by creating conditions to support the student parents, such as providing flexible hours and schedules, assistance with child care as well as through connections with or assignments to caring adults. Findings pertaining to the family domain risk factor—high family mobility, low

education level of parents, family disruption, low contact with school, low educational expectations, and lack of conversations about school—and effective counter strategies also revealed a strong connection to positive school climate. The impact of a supportive school climate and appropriate interventions can be huge.

By reviewing the effective strategies for dropout prevention advocated by the National Dropout Prevention Center and adapted by many states as a framework for dropout prevention, those who promote a positive school climate will find they have established a fertile support system for successful implementation of these strategies.

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

The NDPC has identified 15 Effective Strategies that lie at the heart of solving the dropout problem. They have been grouped into four major clusters: School and Community Perspective; Early Interventions; Basic Core Strategies; and Making the Most of Instruction. We offer an overview of each of the four major clusters and corresponding school climate practices.

1. School and Community Perspective
This cluster of strategies provides the supportive environment and infrastructure in which a positive school climate is able to thrive. Through *systemic renewal,* schools participate in a continuing process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners. Building on this school-based climate, expanding to a *school-community collaboration* enables all groups in a community to provide collective support to the school and strengthens the caring supportive environment. Providing *safe learning environments*, including all daily experiences, at all grade levels, and a comprehensive violence prevention plan will enhance positive social

attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students.

School leaders need to (1) ensure all education stakeholders know that school climate is a system-wide effort that engages all students equitably; (2) engage community partners as contributors to the school's climate; and (3) ensure the school's climate provides a safe and nurturing environment for students and adults to feel connected to the school.

2. Early Interventions
This cluster of strategies recognizes that families, schools, and communities can never start too early in positive development of their young people, and that involving parents in the process is extraordinarily important. Research consistently finds that *family engagement* has a direct, positive effect on children's achievement and is the most accurate predictor of a student's success in school. A school climate that supports that engagement is vital. This engagement should be begun in the earliest days through *early childhood education*, including birth-to-five interventions. This empowers parents to see that providing a child additional enrichment can enhance brain development and they can play an important role in that. A natural role for family members is to enhance *early literacy development* by helping to improve children's reading and writing skills, a necessary foundation for effective learning in all other subjects.

School leaders should effectively communicate with all education stakeholders that a safe, nurturing and engaging school climate in the earliest school grades is necessary to build student resiliency and competencies. In addition, family and community members should be encouraged to contribute to their school's climate and to early literacy programs.

3. Basic Core Strategies
With the awareness that traditional school models do not meet all the needs of young people, this cluster of strategies emphasizes

unique learning opportunities for all students. For example, *mentoring/tutoring* can offer important new relationships that provide a context for learning and growing in positive ways. *Alternative schooling* offers supportive environments that allow potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student's individual social needs and academic requirements for a high school diploma. *After-school opportunities* offer experiences that are especially important for students at risk of school failure because these programs fill the afternoon and summer "gap time" with constructive and engaging activities that offer further connections to school.

Finally, *service-learning* gives students engaging learning experiences in their schools and communities through applying knowledge and skills to solve real-world problems. This strategy promotes meaningful rigorous learning, personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility, making it an integral part of school climate reform initiatives. While service-learning is an instructional methodology that increases teacher effectiveness, it is also a core strategy for increasing student engagement that addresses the dropout problem.

School leaders should engage all education stakeholders in developing and sustaining a school climate that recognizes the diverse learning styles of students. Stakeholders develop corresponding school structures and teaching and learning strategies that assist students in acquiring and enhancing content knowledge and skills and dispositions.

4. Making the Most of Instruction
This cluster focuses on instruction, and instruction that respects students by engaging them in the learning experience is an important component of school climate. Lack of engagement in their academic classes is one of the reasons students give for their dissatisfaction with school. With targeted *professional*

development, teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need an avenue by which they can continue to develop skills, techniques, and learn about innovative strategies to improve their instructional methods. *Active learning*, as its name implies*,* embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. More so every day, *educational technology* offers some of the best opportunities for delivering instruction to engage students in authentic learning, addressing multiple intelligences, and adapting to students' learning styles. It also contributes to *individualized instruction,* which allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies to consider individual differences. And the final strategy, *career and technology education (CTE)*, with preparation for post-secondary or career and supported by a related guidance program, is essential for all students to see relevance in their studies to their future.

School leaders provide quality professional development to teachers and other school staff to increase their active teaching knowledge and skills as well as how to contribute to a corresponding school climate. In addition, school leaders ensure that the school's climate supports active learning and education technology with a focus on career education so that students understand the relevance of education to their current and future lives.

Summary

The proven practices of dropout prevention are most effective when all are employed collectively throughout the school and district wide, at all grade levels. Essential to their successful implementation is a positive school climate, which applies across all four clusters. This comprehensive approach impacts all students, both those identified at risk, and those one might not identify as such. When targeted strategies are implemented for those students who do have the greater needs, it is necessary that the overall school environment be one that is supportive of each of these strategies for them to succeed in their goals.

References

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