Locating and Re-Engaging Secondary Students with Disabilities

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This set of resources organizes evidence-based strategies for re-engaging and supporting students with disabilities and their families through school completion. The three related quick references: ***Part 1: Identifying Who Is Missing; Part 2: Re-Engaging Students; Part 3: Continuing Ongoing Dropout Prevention*** were informed by the following research: [National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (2011)](#); [Rumberger et al., (2017)](#); [Wilkins (2014)](#), as well as experience working in states and districts and other resources from [NTACT: The Collaborative](#). Each section includes research-based guiding steps, a deeper dive into additional information, and an opportunity for users to identify their own next steps. The steps and additional information reflect culturally responsive and sustaining practices, critical to working with the populations of most concern. The purpose is to support school- and district-level practitioners, families, and administrators in efforts to reclaim successful educational experiences for secondary students with disabilities and their families most negatively impacted by events since 2020.

Introduction

The socially distanced, remote, and virtual instruction and service provision of the 2020-21 school year indicated slowed or lost learning for many students ([National Academy of Sciences, 2020](#)). This has been particularly challenging for some students with disabilities ([National Public Radio reporting series](#), June, 2021). Additionally, Education Week (July, 2021) reported that 1.4 million school-age students did not enroll in school last year in the United States. While those numbers reflected a concentration of younger students, school districts report an inability to locate secondary students with disabilities—especially historically marginalized populations of color in poverty, as well as students experiencing homelessness—for educational and other services. Through the work of the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative with states, educators have expressed specific concern about an increased dropout rate for populations which historically (pre-pandemic) exited school prematurely at higher rates than other students.

Prior to the pandemic in the 2018-19 school year, 19.2% of students experiencing homelessness were students with disabilities, compared to 14% of the school-age population ([National Center for Homeless Education](#), 2019). The interrelationship between homelessness and not completing high school is that a youth with less than a high school diploma is 346% more likely to experience homelessness ([Voices of Youth Count](#), University of Chicago). Lost learning and disengaged students and the interplay of disparities for these specific populations must be

central to the efforts families, schools, districts, and service providers undertake in the coming months and years.

Communities have experienced tremendous loss during the pandemic. The emotional, health, and financial toll for families affected by high rates of job loss or insecurity, illness, or mortality have consequences for students in those families and may be even more impactful for students with disabilities (Goodman, Morris, Morris, & McGarrity, 2020). Supporting both youth and their families during this unprecedented time is key to successful interventions for locating and re-engaging secondary youth with disabilities.
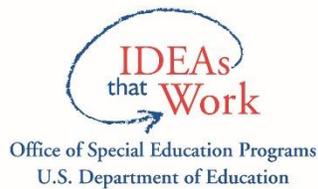
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Locating and Re-Engaging Secondary Students with Disabilities

Part 1: Identify Who Is Missing

To contain COVID-19, most schools across the United States transitioned to remote learning in March 2020. While schools, districts, and governors' offices identified creative ways to connect students through expanded internet service and additional layers of nutrition and mental health services, many students may have become disconnected from school. Data on the extent of the impact are not yet widely available, though it is expected that such students are overrepresented by youth with disabilities of color, living in poverty and possibly experiencing homelessness and unaware of reentry options. That said, one of the first steps in meeting the needs of disengaged students is identifying youth who have left high school without a diploma. The following strategies are recommended for use by district teams, school teams, nonprofit community-based organizations serving families and youth, and other publicly funded agencies (e.g., law enforcement, public health) to locate and recover out-of-school youth.

Steps
Examine Building-and Student-level Data
- District or school teams should review attendance data from the last three school years.
- To help understand the data, this stage of the work should include someone familiar with the district's existing codes, data-entry procedures, and structures.
- Other team members may include administrators, counselors, teachers, parent/family advocates, non-school agency, or organization representatives
- Identify any patterns or trends in the data regarding chronically absent or missing students. Particularly note differences between the 2020-21 school year and previous years to determine impact on groups of students. If any patterns are associated with disability, gender, race/ethnicity, geographic location, or grade level, this knowledge can help target and inform interventions.
- Continue to study attendance data from the first 9 weeks of school and beyond during the 2021-22 school year to identify struggling students who may need more support.
- Using unique student ID numbers, ensure students who are chronically absent or who appear to have dropped out have not re-enrolled in another school or district.
- Through data-sharing agreements with other agencies, identify youth who may be receiving services through other public agencies or non-profit organizations.

Target Outreach
- District or school teams must engage with housing developments, malls, sports venues, businesses, community centers, homeless shelters and service providers, churches, and community agencies such as workforce centers, departments of social services, law enforcement, or disability serving agencies (based on the data collected) to share information with youth about reentry opportunities.
- Conduct home visits to encourage out-of-school youth to return to school by providing information about options.
- Follow-up with text messages or calls from a trusted or familiar adult.

Partner
- Partner with public and privately funded agencies and organizations to find former students and share information about reentry opportunities.
- Facilitate referral processes to support access to transportation, childcare, health care, nutrition, housing, tutoring, case managers, or mentors.

Conduct Re-engagement Fairs
- Representatives from district schools, charter schools, trade schools, community colleges, and GED testing centers may convene in one location at an advertised time(s) to provide information for out-of-school youth on re-enrollment options.
- Partner agencies including vocational rehabilitation, social services, mental health, workforce, and community and faith-based organizations should be encouraged to participate and collaborate (e.g., on location, refreshments, volunteers) in hosting these fairs.
- Provide on-site and clear instructions for youth and families about follow-up access to transcript evaluations, credit-recovery enrollment, enrollment in employment or life-skills instruction, and other enrollment options. Most *students do not fully understand the importance of entering the adult world with a high school diploma, and those who want to return are often unaware of how to begin the reentry process.*
- Engage business leaders, civic clubs, and other groups in the community for a possible venue, door prizes, event volunteers, or long-term mentors.

Market
- Create social media campaigns to share reentry information and advertise re-engagement fairs, and ongoing access to re-engagement services through the district or other agencies.

Dive Deeper

- [Reentry Programs for Out-of-School Youth with Disabilities. Part I: The Need for a Broad Range of Options.](#) Describes effective interventions to reduce dropout for students with disabilities, and provide recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.
- [Core Data Tools.](#) Tools designed to help districts and schools organize, examine, analyze, and share data that impact graduation and dropout rates.

- [Attendance Works](). Provides resources to build state and local capacity, develop resources, and implement effective strategies to improve attendance.
- [Calculating Chronic Absence](). Key strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism fit into three-tiered support systems
- [Considerations Regarding Transition-Age Students with Disabilities Accessing Funding from the American Rescue Plan and Other Short-Term Resources](). A resource for transition-focused professionals in school districts and a consideration as additional funding sources for expanded efforts to relocate youth - especially those experiencing homelessness - for services.

What Will You Do to Locate Missing Students?

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Part 2: Re-Engaging Students

Once a disengaged student has been located, reengaging, and keeping that student in an educational program is the next step. Start by determining why the student left school—ask her or him—then work on finding solutions to address the reason(s). Returning to the exact school environment the student left is unlikely to produce different results the second time around, so thoughtfulness, creativity, and flexibility are important in working with these youth.

There is no single formula for success; however, implementing culturally responsive and sustaining practices which are included in the steps below will increase the student's chances of success. Flexibility, whether related to program offerings and pathways to graduation, mode of instruction, instructional setting, and/or scheduling, will be necessary. Because most students with disabilities that dropout are credit deficient, credit recovery opportunities should be identified and made available to the student. Student engagement—a critical factor in student retention—can be positively influenced by programs designed to improve relationships at school and increase the student's sense of belonging, accountability, motivation, efficacy, optimism, and effort (Klare, Baker & Butler, 2018).

For students with disabilities, Individualized Education Program or 504 Plans will need to be updated to reflect current performance and instruction and services necessary to achieve post-school goals.

Steps

Offer Welcoming and Safe School Climate
- Support student-driven planning and address individual student needs
- Model and support emotional well-being and a safe environment
- Inform families and students of safety measures (health and mental health) in place and be responsive to questions
- Model and support academic engagement
- Assign caring adult advocates
- Ensure that all school personnel and volunteers attend professional development on understanding cultural bias, intersectionality of disability and race/ disability and poverty, and the importance of asset-focused approaches to working with students, families, and colleagues

- Communicate that the school believes the student can and will succeed
- Connect school and classroom activities and learning to lessons and skills learned at home
- Avoid the use of deficit focused language when engaging with students and families

Provide Tiered Academic and Social/Emotional Behavior Supports
- Attend to quality instruction
- Acknowledge and reward positive behaviors and academic engagement including attendance
- Remember to acknowledge and laud improvement—perfection may come later
- Model and support goal setting and attainment
- Engage with and offer connections to services for families in need of financial, emotional, or educational support
- Connect families with peer supports
- Acknowledge cultural assets of each family in school-home communication (multiple modes)

Consider Flexibilities for Re-Entry Programs
- Identify and connect returning students to school(s) that integrate on-site job training and may enable students to earn credit for work experience.
- Offer partial day, evening, or asynchronous attendance (through career and technology centers, schools, or programs, community college, or other adult education settings, as needed) so that a young person may acquire credits toward a high school diploma.
- Consider options offered in which students can prepare for the General Educational Development (GED) test and/or earn credits that transfer to industry certification or degree programs at local colleges
- Continue to offer a variety of learning options for students and families for whom in-person learning is not feasible.

Dive Deeper

- [Reentry Programs for Out-of-School Youth with Disabilities. Part I: The Need for a Broad Range of Options.](#) Describes effective interventions to reduce dropout for students with disabilities, and provides recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.
- [Measuring Student Engagement in Upper Elementary through High School](#) (resource)
- [Culturally responsive practices and PBIS](#) (resource)
- [Research on Restorative Practices](#) (resource)
- [Equitable Approaches to Re-Engaging Students and Youth in Education and VR Services](#) (presentation)
- [5 Strategies for Increasing Rigor in Your Classroom](#) (presentation)
- [Specific Tips Focused on Equitable Family Engagement in School Improvement](#) (website and resources)
- *[Check and Connect](#)* (website)

- Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) - grants funded in numerous states
  - [Jefferson County, Alabama](#)
  - [Milwaukee Public Schools](#)
  - [Northern Arizona University](#)
  - [Oregon State University](#)
  - [Renton School District, Washington](#)
- [Funds of Knowledge Toolkit](#) A promising resource for use in classrooms to bridge the gap between school and home, developed by the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.
- [Cost-Feasibility Analysis Toolkit for Supplemental Online Learning Programs](#) A resource for districts or schools considering developing or expanding online education as a flexible offering or enrichment for students recovering skills or credits from the Regional Education Laboratory - Appalachia

What Will You Do to Re-Engage Returning Students?

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Part 3: Continuing Ongoing Dropout Prevention

The variety of reasons that students with disabilities drop out makes it difficult to implement a uniform approach for reentry (Wilkins, 2011). Student engagement is a key component in increasing school completion and post-school outcomes (Finn, 2006; Klare, M., Baker, L., & Butler, R., Bettie, 2018). Maintaining that engagement will be critical to keeping students who have re-enrolled and returned to school. As discussed in the Re-Engage Students resource, building, and maintaining a sense of community in school will support these youth and encourage their retention. Encouraging open communication and building relationships among students and faculty/staff and families are an effective way to develop and support engagement. The presence of caring adults, especially those who understand the backgrounds of students from minority and diverse backgrounds in school can make the difference in keeping or losing a student.

In addition to building and sustaining student engagement, it is important to continually monitor building- and student-level data. Pay attention weekly to data on the ABCs: absences, behavior, and academic performance. In addition to watching for students who are chronically absent or are failing one or more classes, pay attention to those students who are borderline and those whose attendance or behavior patterns have changed. Doing so may inform a timely intervention that could prevent the student from disengaging.

Steps

Collect Quality and Meaningful Data
- Use longitudinal, student-level data to get an accurate read of graduation and dropout rates. To respond to the dropout problem, states, districts, and schools first need an accurate understanding of its scope.
- Use data to identify incoming students with histories of academic problems, truancy, behavioral problems, and retentions.
- Monitor the academic and social performance of all students continually by regularly reviewing student transcripts, test scores, and discipline referrals. The burden of data monitoring can be reduced by using automated alerts in the electronic data systems to call attention to students whose behavior or progress suggests increased risk of dropping out.

- Review student-level data to identify students at risk of dropping out before key academic transitions. Research suggests that students are more likely to drop out of school following a transition to high school, but they can be flagged early for risk of dropping out.
- Monitor students' sense of engagement and belonging in school through interviews, focus groups, and surveys on such topics as the supportiveness of the family and school environment, perceptions of safety, academic rigor, and interactions with adults and other students.
- Collect and document accurate information on student withdrawals. If data on school leavers is not specific or accurate, administrators will not be able to assess the real problems and possibly not pursue appropriate dropout prevention practices.

Personalize the Learning Environment and Instructional Process
- Establish small learning communities (e.g., freshman and content academies, school-within-a-school, etc.).
- Establish team teaching.
- Create smaller classes.
- Create extended time in the classroom (e.g., block scheduling, advisory).
- Encourage student participation in extracurricular activities.

Provide Academic Support and Enrichment
- Provide individual or small group support in test-taking and study skills.
- Provide individual or small group instruction in core subject areas.
- Provide time and opportunities for credit accumulation through after school, Saturday school, virtual, or summer enrichment programs.

Assign Adult Advocated to Students at Risk of Dropping Out
- Select adults with a persistent belief in the ability of all students to succeed. Select those who have demonstrated communication, cooperation, and collaboration skills.
- Maintain caseloads that allow for regularly scheduled connection with a student.
- Advocates should be based, primarily, at the school. Roles could include teacher, counselor, staff person, or other community members who can be links to families.
- Establish a time in the school day/ week for advocates to meet with student and family regarding attendance, career goals, post-school plans, academic progress, and personal successes/ challenges.

Dive Deeper

- 2017 What Works Clearinghouse: Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools Four evidence-based recommendations for increasing high school graduation and reducing dropout rates in high school.
- Risk Calculator Online early-warning system based on the ABCs and engagement measures. To register for an account to use this tool, email riskcalculations@uncc.edu.

- [The Transition Gradebook](#) A local database tool for schools to record the transition-related activities, including Pre-Employment Transition Services, that the school provides to each student, regardless of their participation in special education.
- [School Completion Toolkit](#) A comprehensive set of information covering the breadth of issues briefly addressed in these 3 quick references
- [*Gateway to College*](#) Programs to help disconnected youth get a high school diploma and attend college
- [Online Credit Recovery: Enrollment and Passing Patterns in Montana Digital Academy Courses](#) Regional Education Laboratory Program description of credit recovery with particular relevance during a period of increased online or flexible learning options
- [Re-engaging High School Dropouts as a Growth Strategy for PA](#) Brief overview of Operation Re-Start in Pennsylvania
- [Addressing a Full Range of Student Needs](#) Series of webinars and related materials on re-engaging and serving high-risk students, relevant to Personalized Learning, Academic Support and Enrichment, and Adult Advocates from the Comprehensive Center Network
- [Becoming Trauma Informed](#) A brief from the National Comprehensive Center Network focused on the role of school personnel and school buildings in addressing adverse childhood experiences, which has relevance for successful comprehensive dropout prevention/ school completion programs
- [Decreasing Dropout Rates of Minority Male Youth](#) - an overview of effective practices, with a specific lens on the needs of Black, Hispanic, and Native American youth with disabilities.
- [Characteristics and Education Outcomes of Utah High School Dropouts Who Re-enrolled](#) Results of a research study from the Regional Education Laboratory at WestEd for those interested in a deeper understanding of possible factors associated with re-enrollment of students who have exited school prematurely

What Will You Do to Continue to Support Students Toward Graduation?

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