



Indicator: The school provides all students with academic supports (e.g., tutoring, co-curricular activities, tiered interventions) to keep them on track for graduation. (5128)

Explanation: The evidence review suggests that the school implement a flexibly responsive early warning system that identifies those students most at risk for academic and social struggle. Effective early warning systems track indicators to inform staff about student academic and social successes as well as red flagging those students in jeopardy of academic and/or social failures. Key indicators allow the school to track the progress or lack of progress of all students and in response offer specific and targeted interventions to struggling students. In doing so, dropout rates decrease and on time graduation rates increase.

Questions: What process will the school employ to establish an early warning system? How will the school define and adopt indicators that will red flag academically struggling students? How will the school define and adopt indicators that will red flag students with social struggles? How often will this data be collected? Who will review this data? What process will be used to align interventions to the red flagged students? What process will be used to monitor the interventions for success? How will the school track students for on time graduation?

National statistics show that nearly 30 percent of students who enter high school in a given year will not graduate with their peers four years later; this equates to approximately 1.5 million students dropping out of school each year (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Yet the problem does not begin in high schools. Students often show early on that they are struggling to engage in school and succeed academically. These students may display disruptive classroom behaviors, receive identified support services, or repeat courses or grades. However, other students may struggle just as much but show fewer visible signs of their greater likelihood to drop out. Sometimes, these students demonstrate their disengagement by simply not coming to school.

The signs and symptoms identified above do not always appear right before a student decides to leave school. It is very common to see habitual negative behaviors as early as elementary and middle school, and these often become engrained practices by high school. Nield, et al. (2007) write, “many students who drop out of high school send strong distress signals for years. These students are metaphorically waving their hands and asking for help” (p. 28).

How can schools identify which students are sending these “distress signals?”

Research has shown that certain demographic groups are particularly susceptible to leaving high school before graduating. Students who are from lower-income families, who are African-American or Latino, or who are male, are all more likely to drop out of school than their peers. Other social factors, such as being a victim of abuse and neglect, being highly transient, or being homeless, provide often-insurmountable challenges for high school students (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Pinkus, 2008). However, it has been found that certain school-related indicators can more powerfully predict whether or not a student drops out than his or her background or experiences (Pinkus, 2008).

The body of literature about dropout prevention has come to a fairly widespread consensus on the school-related warning signs of a potential high school dropout. Most simply put, educators in middle and high schools need to be attentive to the “ABC’s – high absenteeism, behavior problems, and course failure” (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009, p. 4). The authors indicate that these three indicators are frequently interrelated and are the strongest predictors of a student dropping out in the future.

As early as sixth grade, the likelihood of a student dropping out of high school is about 75 percent if he or she has even one of the following indicators: a failing grade in a core class, an unsatisfactory behavior record, or being severely chronically absent. Students who have been retained and those who receive special education services are also at much greater risk for not completing high school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

Even for students with none of these predictors in middle school can experience a negative shift in outcomes and behaviors in the ninth grade. Heppen and Therriault (2009) describe the ninth grade year as a “make or break” time for students (p. 1); it is also the year that sees more dropouts than any other in high school. Students were especially likely to eventually drop out if they accumulated fewer than two credits in their first year of high school or attended school less than 70 percent of the time (Nield, et al., 2007).

A particular flag for intervention is when a student is found to be missing more than 10 percent of instructional time due to absence. Academically, Heppen and Therriault (2009) suggest three particular areas of data that should be tracked for freshmen: course failures in the first semester, grade point average (GPA), and credits earned. Students with a GPA below 2.0 are considered at risk of dropping out, as well as those who failed courses and/or did not earn credits from the courses they took (p.3). Kennelly and Monrad (2007) emphasize that end of year grades, as well as first semester grades, are also important to consider as an indication of future performance.

How can schools use keep their identified at-risk students on track for graduation?

The good news is that the academic predictors of not finishing high school are found in data that is readily available to school administrators and teachers. Demo-

graphic information, attendance data, course grades, and disciplinary records are often accessible in real-time, allowing for tracking and immediate intervention. (Heppen & Therriault, 2009). Schools can access and address student and school wide attendance records on a daily basis, and it is easy to see patterns in this data early on in the school year. However, school staff must be trained on proper analysis of the collected data so that it can be used appropriately and effectively. It is critical that this information be continually updated and accurate to ensure the best possible processes and outcomes for intervention. (Heppen & Therriault, 2009).

Heppen and Therriault (2009) discuss a system developed by the Consortium on Chicago School Research which uses academic and attendance indicators in ninth grade to determine whether or not a student is “on track” to graduate. Under this model, a student is identified as “on track” if he or she earns five or more course credits and no more than one failing semester grade in a core class during freshman year. Students identified as “on-track” are 3.5 times more likely to graduate than their off-track peers (p. 2).

Many researchers suggest that a system of tiered interventions at the middle and high school levels, called an early warning system, has proven helpful in addressing student needs before it is too late. The first tier represents school-wide initiatives, such as attendance reward systems and high-quality instruction, which are usually sufficient for the majority of students. The second tier aims to help approximately 10-20 percent of the school through targeted interventions, including an in-school mentor or an attendance contract. Students in the top five to ten percent who need the most support receive intensive interventions, such as one-on-one or small group tracking and support (Nield, et al., 2007; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009).

Ninth graders in particular need alternatives to their core classes during the school day, such as extracurricular activities, the arts, or service learning, that are available to them if they attend school regularly. This allows students who struggle in reading and math to have positive experiences and small successes at school throughout their day. (Nield, et al., 2007). Institutional factors within the school can also promote better outcomes for students. Kennelly and Monrad (2007) note that activities during extended learning time, positive school climates, effec-

tive and engaging teachers, and a high level of rigor in coursework were consistently found at schools with relatively low dropout rates. Wrap-around social services for students and families who are particularly at risk can also have a significant impact on student outcomes. Finally, Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009) discuss how important positive and trusting student-teacher relationships are to a student's school experience, so much so that these relationships are correlated with lower dropout rates.

Understanding that these early warning signs can have dire consequences is the first step towards helping prevent high school dropouts. Knowing which data points are most predictive of future difficulties allows educators and administrators to more appropriately target interventions and supports for the students who need them most. Early warning systems allow schools to allocate their staff time and resources more efficiently and effectively, toward the goal of helping students graduate who may not have been able to without support (Pinkus, 2008).

References and Resources

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