Review of the Literature in Dropout Prevention

December 19

2014

Guided by policy and practice, dropout prevention research in U.S. public schools has experienced resurgence since the late 2000s. In this review, the latest trends in dropout prevention research and practice will be discussed, with resource examples provided. Funding for this literature review was provided by the Colorado Department of Education, USDE High School Graduation Initiative (HSGI) project, in support of the Colorado Graduation Pathways (CGP).

Leann M. Morgan, Ph.D., LPC, NCC

Table of Contents

Introduction

It is no secret that American high schools face continuing pressure to graduate students on time and with adequate competencies to pursue postsecondary options (Kena, Aud, Johnson, Wang, Zhang, Rathbun, Wilkinson-Flicker, & Kristapovich, 2014). With dropout rates remaining relatively consistent across the country over the past 30 years (Snyder & Dillow, 2013), it is more important than ever to uncover effective strategies for engaging students in school and guiding them toward high school completion (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009). The current climate in secondary education is one of promise and commitment from those that are willing to "stand in the gap," and be a caring adult for students in need (Zaff, Pufall, Anderson, McClay, & Maharaj, 2014). Through creative means, secondary students may find alternatives to traditional graduation pathways and increased academic and social success.

The purpose of this document is to provide an update to the dropout prevention best practices from around the country, in order to better address the goals of the Colorado Department of Education as outlined in the January, 2014 strategic plan (CDE, 2014). To be more specific, the information presented will directly speak to goal #3, the need for students to "catch up" to proficiency levels appropriate for their grade level and encourage those who are proficient to move up to advanced curriculum, and goal #4, which supports efforts to increase the 6-year graduation rate to 90% by 2018 and insist students to be postsecondary and workforce ready upon graduation (CDE, 2014). The intervention strategies chosen from the field will directly apply to these goals and provide educators, counselors, and administrators with effective ways of providing support for diverse groups of students around the state. Through policy and initiatives that will allow for alternative pathways to graduation and increase postsecondary readiness, these goals may be achieved. In order advance the knowledge and awareness of

educators in Colorado about the current state of dropout prevention and engagement, a review of the literature and best practices is imperative. The following document will serve as a tool for affirming and guiding future efforts in dropout prevention and student engagement as Coloradans work toward addressing the social/emotional, academic, postsecondary, and workforce readiness needs of all students.

Review of the Literature

According to the website *What Works Clearinghouse* (WWC, 2008) there are three outcome domains for dropout prevention including, *staying in school*, where outcome measures are established for determining whether a student dropped out of school and the number of days she/he was enrolled and attended school, *progressing in school*, which includes outcomes that assess the number of high school course credits the student has earned, whether the student was promoted to the next grade, and the highest grade the student has completed, and *completing school* which includes outcomes that measure whether the student has successfully completed high school within a school district or obtained a GED (WWC, 2008). There were three interventions identified for addressing the domain for staying in school and progressing in school including, 1) Career Academies, which offer hands-on, work-based learning opportunities, 2) Talent Development High Schools, which offer organizational/management components, innovative curriculum, professional development, and parent/community involvement, and 3) Accelerated Middle School Model which supports the need for below grade level students the opportunity to "catch up" by providing additional instruction and support to remediate the deficits in learning. This concept might be an option for Colorado schools to achieve goal #3 of the strategic plan. However, for the purposes of this review, the literature will focus on the domain of *completing school* as a focus for intervention and resources. In order to support these

efforts, it is important to understand the risk factors associated with school completion within the context of postsecondary and workforce readiness.

While 75.4% of students in Colorado graduate on –time, policy researchers have called for national graduation rates of 90% by the year 2020, with no less than 80% present challenges for many states (Zaff et al., 2014). Despite efforts at the state and national levels, the dropout crisis has remained consistent, but large populations of low-income and minority students continue to leave school without completing (Belfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013). Recent encouraging research has found that young Latino children in low-income areas show strong social skills in the classroom due to good parenting practices that facilitate learning in elementary school. However, these gains are undermined by mediocre schools as they grow older, thus increasing their risk of dropping out (Fuller & Coll, 2010). These gaps in completion for underrepresented youth are counterintuitive to postsecondary and workforce readiness initiatives and must be addressed in order to truly engage students, families and communities in the process of supporting the next generation of workers. Breaking down the critical hot-spots where interventions might best be applied is an important part in supporting purposeful, systemic, sustainable change. These hot-spot risk factors will be examined below.

Several risk factors affect children born at the intersection of race and poverty throughout their development predicting school failure or dropout and entry into the juvenile justice system. Children of color struggling academically or acting out are often met with police intervention, suspensions, or expulsions instead of appropriate academic intervention in schools of poor quality (Children's Defense Fund, 2007). African American students in particular are disciplined or suspended at disproportionate rates for reasons that include lack of teacher training (in classroom management or culturally competent practices) and racial stereotypes only

contributing further to disengagement and later dropout from school (APA, 2012). Risk of falling into the school to prison pipeline is particularly pronounced for boys of color with approximately 1 in 3 African American boys and 1 in 6 Latino boys projected to become incarcerated at least once in their lifetimes (Children's Defense Fund, 2007). Given the right opportunities and necessary investment, students of color living in poverty can achieve success in school and avoid the dropout trap. Schools that have employed interventions that utilize strategies like the ones below have demonstrated higher completion rates for students of color.

- intensive instruction (longer school hours and Saturday school),
- monitoring and encouragement of attendance,
- student mentoring,
- after-school and extra-curricular programs,
- high expectations of students from adults and peers,
- engagement and involvement of parents, families, and communities

(APA, 2012; Toldson, 2008)

Personal connections students form with a caring adult in their school may make the difference between student academic success and failure. Peer relationships can create a set of norms and values that either promote or undermine academic achievement. Meaningful (or positive) relationships with peers that promote psychological and life skills may promote academic achievement and motivation, however, negative peer pressure or social disapproval toward school work might lead some students to drop out of school (Chang & Romero, 2008). Recognizing the social needs of students as imperative to successful academic engagement may

increase the likelihood of successful completion and postsecondary and workforce readiness (Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010; Zullig, Hubner, & Patton , 2011).

Noncognitive Factors

How students interact within the school context (school and community climate toward education and student success) can influence attitudes, motivation, and performance. According to Barsalou (2010), studying students in silos of intellectual capacity or deficit is no longer working. We must examine students' capacity for learning within the context in which they reside, and consider the noncognitive "soft skills" as part of everyday learning.

Within the realm of education and counseling research, "social norms" are defined as the *culture* of the school, whereas the school climate is defined as the *shared perceptions* of the students within a school environment (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). School climate has been determined by some as the primary influence on students' involvement in negative behaviors, such as bullying, relational aggression, cheating, and school failure (Liu & Liu, 2011). Students determine their level of involvement in negative impact behaviors by assessing the social norms of their environment and making decisions accordingly. According to Gendron, Williams, & Guerra (2011), "Children develop normative beliefs about behavior that guide their actions," (p. 153). In summary, if students' perception of the social climate of their school is one that accepts and supports negative behaviors, then those behaviors will become more pervasive over time. Those perceptional determinants tend to set parameters for behavior within the school and students become accustomed to a higher standard of behavior from both peers and adults alike.

According to Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf (2008), students' perceptions of their "school climate" were positively correlated to their academic achievement, issues of adjustment, and social and personal attitudes toward others. Social relationships play an encompassing role in the

lives of high school students, especially those between students and teachers, students and their peers, in addition to their overall feelings about their school's social environment (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008; Liu & Lu, 2011; Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011). Moreover, students tend to have better grades and have fewer social problems if they feel there is a caring adult who supports them at school (Eliot et al., 2010; Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). According to Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson, & Beechum (2012), educational attainment may be influenced by the school climate as well as the cultural or social norms of the student groups within the school. By identifying climate and culture norms as a part of the system, educators will be better able to meet students where they are, instead of vice versa.

The physical environment of the school can also be a factor in student achievement. What happens within the walls of the school may be as important to student learning outcomes as the building itself (Liu & Lu, 2011; Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011). The term' "school," has been broadly defined as any interaction that takes place within the school building and places beyond the school premises (i.e., school buses, field trips, extra-curricular activities when the school is responsible for the student) (Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011). When conceptualizing the "climate" of a school, several factors are considered such as; socioeconomic levels, racial and ethnic diversity, stability of community, the propensity toward violence, crime rate, and community support (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). Students who have a negative perception of school, due to the high transient rate of fellow students, or high turnover of teachers, will most likely have a poor perception of the school's climate (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). The climate of a school can influence the academic achievement of students, and thus impact students' perceptions of graduation (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). Students that perceive the

school to be in a constant state of disruption, often report not feeling very valued, respected, or safe and experience difficulties in academic and/or social development. In situations where students reported feeling valued, as evidenced by feelings that the teachers were committed and competent, they were less likely to engage in at-risk behaviors (Liu & Liu , 2011). Social variables such as these are indicators that the school climate influences the behavior of students, either negatively or positively, depending on the students' collective perceptions.

Another key factor in dropout prevention is recognizing that efforts need to start at lower grades in order to be effective. Issues related to chronic absenteeism include lower academic performance, grade retention, and subsequent dropout (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Chang & Romero, 2008).

Intervention strategies found in the literature to support early identification of risk factors include, providing systematic updates on early warning systems and include the use of interdisciplinary teams, hold regular meetings of school staff teams to discuss students' issues, plan appropriate interventions, and provide follow-up and feedback regarding intervention strategies already in place (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009). One additional intervention strategy is to organize and support a "second team of adults" to provide intervention services within the school building. Those adults would be trained in how to work with the student on attaining academic success, but also personal and social issues that arise (Everyone Graduates Center, 2009).

Reaching Up

The Center for Promise research team (Zaff et al., 2014) traveled across the country to investigate these initial research questions:

- What do young people say about why they leave high school before graduating? What circumstances surrounded the decision to leave?

- What were students' lives like when they left school, and what effects did leaving school have on them and their families?

- Why do young people say they come back to school?

- What opportunities do young people have to re-engage after leaving school, and what barriers do they encounter along the way?

The research team conducted a systematic analysis of 200+ interviews and nearly 3,000 survey responses from students who had either been continuously-enrolled (and graduated from high school) or who had interrupted-enrollment (and been out of school at least one semester), all from within16 high-poverty urban areas across the country (Zaff et al., 2014). Using the continuously-enrolled students as a comparison group, the researchers set out to determine what differences in experience existed between those students and the interrupted enrollment students. Four themes emerged from the data that helped the researchers understand the processes by which the students' enrollment became interrupted. The first theme described how a ***cluster of factors*** contribute to students leaving school, not just one. The second spoke to how the students' perceived their ***environments to be toxic***, including violence in the home, pervasive health problems, and "unsafe, unsupportive, or disrespectful school climates and policies" (Zaff et al., 2014, p. 7). The third revealed how the students ***lacked the connectedness to caring adults*** in their home, school, and community. The final theme that emerged demonstrated students' ***resilience***, despite the lack of support they felt. According to Zaff et al. (2014),

> *Young people who left school have strengths that enable them to cope in difficult*
>
> *contexts. To meet long-term goals like staying in or going back to school, getting a*

better job, or making positive contributions to their communities, young people needed

more than their own perseverance; they need to "reach up." That is, consistent with the

principles of positive youth development, young people began to thrive academically,

socially, and emotionally when they were able to connect to individuals and institutions

that support them (Zaff et al, 2014, p.7).

Of the students from 30 group interviews, the interrupted –enrollment students reported high levels of inconsistency in their lives including such risk factors as, homelessness (87%), incarcerated parent (79%), moving homes (50%), changing schools (50%), and foster care (11%), each factor posing barriers to school enrollment and completion (Zaff et al., 2014). The numbers of students who reenter school and complete the requirements for a diploma is on the rise (Balfanz, Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Fox, 2009). Through systemic support and the right type of resources for reentry into school, students may experience record success.

The findings of the study implicate the need for education professionals to recognize the strengths students possess and understand they are stronger than current research might imply (Zaff et al., 2014). Recognizing that students with excessive life stressors, (financial, familial, etc.) need help keeping education at the top of their list of priorities, caring adults may offer guidance and life-management support. By offering fewer "easy exits" from school and more smooth pathways to reentry, students may view staying in school a more attractive option than leaving, with reentry for those that do leave made more accessible (Zaff et al., 2014, p. 37). According to the research findings, peers, parents, and adult supporters matter to students contemplating dropping out. Expectations must be clearly communicated, and support always available. Showing support and helping students make connections to other adults who can assist them in solving problems, is much more effective than just caring without action. One last

finding suggested that adults should offer a helping hand to students in the form of active listening and providing a consistently supportive environment with high expectations for success. (Zaff et al., 2014).

Recommendation for Best Practice

The literature in dropout prevention is quite robust (APA, 2012; Balfanz et al., 2013; Zaff et al, 2014), with many programs and resources tried and tested for effectiveness and ease of implementation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009) it may be difficult to determine which approach best suits a particular student population. The resources contained in this section illustrate a wide range of options for addressing the dropout crisis in our schools. Divided by resource type, the links and descriptions provide a working document for districts and schools to utilize as they prepare programs that best address the needs of their students.

<u>Tools and Models for Dropout Prevention</u> (www.every1graduates.org)

Early Warning and Response Systems
http://new.every1graduates.org/tools-and-models/early-warning-and-response-systems/

Comprehensive Whole-School Reform Models
http://new.every1graduates.org/tools-and-models/comprehensive-whole-school-reform-models/

New School Designs
http://new.every1graduates.org/tools-and-models/new-school-designs/

Innovations in Curriculum and Instruction
http://new.every1graduates.org/tools-and-models/innovations-in-curriculum-and-instruction/

School, Family, and Community Partnership: Model Programs
http://new.every1graduates.org/tools-and-models/school-family-and-community-partnerships/

Pathways to College and Career
http://new.every1graduates.org/tools-and-models/pathways-to-college-and-career/

Alternative Assessment of Success (Project-based learning) http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/NAPCS-OPP-OverAge-Report-05.pdf

Examples of Exemplary Programs and/or Community Partnerships

Zone 126 (Astoria, NY)
http://zone126.org/who-we-are/mission-and-vision

Youth Opportunity (Yo!) (Baltimore, MD)
http://www.yobaltimore.org/about_yo.html

YouthBuild (Boston, MA and Providence, RI)
http://youthbuildboston.org/aboutus/

The Center for Teen Empowerment (Boston, MA)
http://www.teenempowerment.org/about.htm

Magic Johnson Accelerated Achievement Academy (Cincinnati, OH)
http://magicjohnsonbridgescape.com/about-us

Learning Works at Homeboy Industries, Inc. (Los Angeles, CA)
 http://www.homeboyindustries.org/why-we-do-it/

United Teen Equity Center (Lowell, MA)
http://www.utec-lowell.org/programs/overview

Y - Build (Nashville, TN)
http://ybuildnashville.tripod.com/id1.html

Learning Works Charter School (Pasadena, CA)
http://www.publicworksinc.org/lw/aboutus/mission/

Youth United for Change (YUC) (Philadelphia, PA)
http://youthunitedforchange.org/

E3 Centers (Philadelphia, PA)
http://www.pyninc.org/programs/e3-power-centers.php

Ujamaa Place (St. Paul, MN)
http://ujamaaplace.org/about-us/

Brotherhood, Inc. (St. Paul, MN)
http://brotherhoodmn.org/about_us

United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona
 http://www.unitedwaytucson.org/About-Us

Houston Independent School District—Twilight High School
http://www.houstonisd.org/domain/7908

A Sample of National Websites to Support Dropout Prevention

- National Dropout Prevention Center
- College Readiness for All Toolbox
- US Department of Education
- Check & Connect, Institute on Community Integration
- OJJDP Truancy Prevention Website
- Southeast Regional Educational Laboratory
- Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
- NASP Center Free Publications (National Association of School Psychologists)
- National Service-Learning Partnership
- National Council for Community and Education Partnerships
- What Works Clearinghouse-USDOE
- National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices
- American Diploma Project--Achieve, Inc.
- Southern Regional Education Board
- Education Week
- America's Promise Alliance
- Alliance for Excellent Education
- Data Quality Campaign: Using Data to Improve Student Achievement
- Boost Up
- American School Counselor Association
- American Counseling Association
- Jobs for the Future

Discussion/ Implications

The comprehensive collection of resources presented above may seem to some to be more than enough for schools and districts to embrace, modify, and use as intervention tools with their students. However, programs that enjoyed positive outcomes in urban areas of New York may not have appropriate application to the student populations across Colorado. The study by Zaff et al. (2014) seemed to present a framework from which other programs might develop. The areas that need to be further defined include, listening to students concerns and providing continued support, not just periodic curriculum, stay on track and make sure to engage students in systemic Early Warning Systems (EWS) in order to make lasting connections even after

student reengage in school, follow the data to make informed decisions but allow students to be the experts in their lives. It may be easy to assume that students at risk for failure, but according to Zaff et al. (2014), students are much more resilient than the media and even researchers portray them.

Taking into account the need to refine what is offered to our students with regard to best practices, it is worth stating that the national literature supports the goals outlined by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE, 2014) to increase high school completion rates to 90% overall by 2018, more in-depth investigation into the applicability of some of the programming elements is necessary to determine a best fit for Colorado students, teachers, parents, and community members. With an emphasis on community-school partnerships, the movement in dropout prevention seems to be finding the right people within your community and engage them in the partnerships that would be most beneficial to the students (Zaff, 2014). If specific intervention strategies are suggested for each of the regional populations in Colorado, the hope is that educators and administrators would be more apt to provide financial support and encouragement for both the designated dropout prevention specialists and the community of learners as well.

Conclusion

While this list is entirely comprehensive of all available dropout prevention resources, it does represent an array of program types and possible intervention strategies to help propel Colorado students into postsecondary readiness and future employment. Through continued research focused on the needs and internal resources of Colorado schools in relation to public policy and funding, further study and recommendations will be developed in order to provide the best practices in dropout prevention for Colorado's diverse communities. For now, this report

will serve as a base for future work regarding what best practices may be employed by Colorado school counselors, educators, and administrators in order to engage our students to complete high school and become our home-grown, 21st century workforce.

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