Improving Graduation Rates for Students with Disabilities: ABC’s and Beyond

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Our Charge

• At the most fundamental level student needs must be met with an adult response that builds reliable, robust, and durable pathways through high school and onto to post-secondary schooling or training.

• Just as it possible to paint a broad picture of why a high school has low graduation rates, it is also possible to show what it needs to have to succeed.
To graduate high school college and career ready- students need to:

• Acquire a core body of knowledge and skills benchmarked to college and career readiness standards
• Develop a set of learning and self-management skills that enables them to complete the class assignments and tests upon which course passing and credit accrual depend.
• Have reference points that regularly show the quality and intensity of school work needed to succeed in post-secondary environments
• Believe they can learn/do the work and have the motivation to do so
• Attend school on a regular basis
• Help with practical problem solving to overcome the barriers to attending and succeeding in school (positive developmental and supportive relationships with adults in the school,
• opportunities which demonstrate meaningful participation in relevant activities that lead to future post secondary success
Where We Stand: High School Graduation in the 2014-15 School Year

• Since the 2010-11 school year, the national high school graduation rate is up more than four percentage points, rising from 79 percent to a record high of 83.2 percent in 2015.

• Over this five-year period, graduation rates have increased in almost every state and for every student subgroup.

• Progress since 2001 in raising high school graduation rates has resulted in 2.8 million more students graduating from high school rather than dropping out.
Where We Stand: High School Graduation in the 2014-15 School Year

• About half of all states reported high school graduation rates of 85 percent or more in 2015 and are on track to reach a 90 percent graduation rate by 2020.

• However, a substantial number of states are still graduating less than 80 percent of students in four years and several others with graduation rates in the lower 80s that have remained stagnant for years.

• State-level data revealed wide variation across states in the graduation outcomes for different subgroups of students with both positive and concerning trends.
Where We Stand: High School Graduation in the 2014-15 School Year

- Thirty-three states graduated less than 70 percent of their students with disabilities (SWDs), and in four of those states, less than 50 percent of SWDs graduated on time.

- The graduation rate gaps between students with disabilities and those without show how stark the contrast truly is. Nationally, the gap now stands at 21.1 percentage points.

- In 29 states, students in the general education population graduate at rates of 20 percentage points or more than their special education peers. In another 18 states, the gap between students with disabilities and those without is between 10 and 20 percentage points.

- In only three states is the graduation gap less than 10 points (KS, OK, AR)
In Colorado
Where We Stand: Evidence based practices have been identified for adoption

• We have evidence based and promising practices that can – when implemented over time with fidelity – enable schools to make significant progress in helping youth with disabilities stay in school, progress in school, and graduate
Where We Stand: Effective Indicators have been Established

• An effective indicator:
  – Addresses a problem or issue that is considered to be a priority by district leadership, school staff, students, their families and the community and is predictive of the outcome of interest.
  – Provides information that school practitioners can take action on and have an impact on- (e.g., it is both a malleable and actionable factor).
  – Is available at the right time for practitioners to act.
  – Is based on research evidence of a direct causal linkage to the outcome of interest.
Anatomy of Low Dropout Rates

Schools with lower dropout rates have several common features including:

• a caring committed staff with a sense of shared responsibility and efficacy related to student learning and student success;

• a school culture that encourages staff risk taking, self governance and professional collegiality;

• a school structure that provides for personalized learning opportunities and promote student engagement; and

• a school climate characterized by an ethics of caring and supportive relationships; respect, fairness, and trust.
Anatomy of Low Dropout Rates

Schools with lower dropout rates have several common features including:

• Strong leadership that vests dropout prevention in a place of authority
• Early warning systems to identify youth with disabilities who are at risk of school failure and dropout
• Culturally/linguistically relevant and appropriate instructional practices that incorporate values of respect relationships, and reciprocity
• Programs developed in concert with families and community
• Student voice- listening and responding to students in order to empower them to re-invest and engage in their education
• School environments that are equitable for all students, regardless of their ethnicity, socio-economic status, or disability status
The ABC’s

• Students need to attend regularly, focus and behave in school, and do well in their courses to graduate.
• These outcomes are shaped both by student and adult behaviors and can be monitored on a monthly basis.
• Close tracking of a school’s chronic absenteeism rate, suspension and disciplinary infraction rate, and the GPA’s of its students can provide good insight into both student and school progress.
Attendance

• Missing as little as two days a month (or 10% of the school year) significantly impacts a student’s ability to achieve in school.

• Research shows that students who miss this many days struggle to learn to read by the third grade, begin failing courses in middle school and drop out of high school.
Challenging behaviors often cause a student to miss instructional time. If a student has two or more behavior infractions they are at-risk of dropping out, and need additional supports to improve their behavior.

Byrnes and colleagues (2012), found that 32% of first time 9th grade students from both urban and rural schools who received even one out-of-school suspension were more likely to drop out.
Course performance

• Grades earned are clearly related to students’ likelihood of successfully graduating from high school. On average, students who earn a 2.0 GPA or less in their freshman year have significantly lower graduation rates than students who earn a 2.5 or higher (on a 4-point scale).

• Therefore, students with a GPA of 2.0 or less at the end of their first year of high school should be considered “at risk” for dropping out.

• Students who fail one or more core courses OR accumulate fewer credits than the number required for promotion to 10th grade are, at that point, off track for graduation.
9th graders who are on track are four times more likely to graduate than students who are off track
Where We Stand: Evidence based practices have been identified for adoption

- States and school districts have adopted evidence-based practices, including implementing early warning systems to identify and support students who are off track based on their attendance, behavior, and course performance records.
Common Indicators:

Attendance
Behavior
Course Grades

Are ABCs enough?
What more should/could make a difference?
Where do we go from Here?
Additional Considerations

School Climate
Social Emotional Learning
Family Engagement
Work Readiness and Competitive Employment Skills
Student Engagement
Professional Capacity
School Structure
School Climate

- **School climate** is a product of the inter-personal relationships among students, families, teachers, support staff, and administrators. ... A positive **school climate** is recognized as an important target for **school** reform and improving behavioral, academic, and mental health outcomes for students (Thapa et al., 2012).
  - Safety and connectedness
  - Caring relationships with adults
  - Meaningful student participation
  - Substance use at school
  - Bullying and discrimination
  - Student delinquency
Social & Emotional Learning

• Social and emotional learning (SEL) - the process through which students acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to:
  – understand and manage emotions,
  – set and achieve positive goals,
  – feel and show empathy for others,
  – establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Social and emotional competence (self awareness, self management, relationship skills, responsible decision making) provides a foundation for academic success (Zins et al., 2004).
Social & Emotional Learning

• Social and emotional skills are critical to being a good student, citizen, and worker, and many risky behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence, bullying and dropping out) can be prevented or reduced when multiyear, integrated efforts are used to develop students' social and emotional skills.

• Although research suggests that course completion and grades in middle school are the strongest predictors of high school performance and graduation (Farrington et al., 2012), there is increasing evidence that social and emotional competence is also critically important (Durlak et al., 2011).
Family Engagement

Students with engaged families:

• earn higher grades and test scores;
• enroll in higher-level academic programs;
• are promoted on time and earn more credits;
• adapt better to school and attend more regularly;
• have better social skills and behaviors; and
• graduate and go on to postsecondary opportunities.
Work Readiness and Competitive Employment Skills Training

- Research shows that students with disabilities in secondary CTE programs were less likely to drop out and had better employment outcomes higher wages, more hours, more continuous employment (Cobb et al. 1999; Colley & Jamison 1998), and

- Integration of academic and vocational curricula promoted meaningful engagement and inclusion of students with disabilities by increasing persistence, academic achievement, and postsecondary engagement (Eisenmann, 2000)
Student Engagement

• Student engagement figures prominently in the process of dropping out.

• Student engagement is also an important precursor to other aspects of school performance, particularly academic performance in the classroom.

• Because of its importance, scholars have proposed a number of models to explain student engagement
High expectations and engagement

“For me, the turning point was eighth grade. I wasn’t doing very well academically. I think I finally got my lifeboat, life jacket, or whatever you call it, when my teacher recommended me for [a college transition program]. Once I became part of that, it [filled] the void that my family couldn’t provide, which was the academic support and the know-how of the process, because I had no idea.”

— PHI THETA KAPPA STUDENT
Quality of Coursework

• Quality teaching and instructional design,
• Effective adult collaboration and consistency across classrooms,
• Student motivation and the extent to which they have reference points to the amount and intensity of work required to succeed in post-secondary schooling or training
• Additional cognitive or socio-emotional supports needed to achieve

All be measured through an audit of the quality of coursework a representative sample of work students are doing in their classes.
Quality of Relationships

• Motivation, effort, commitment and perseverance are all shaped by inter-personal relations and trust. In high poverty environments positive adult-student, and adult-adult relationships are also a needed antidote to the stress impacts of poverty.

Existing survey and observational instruments exist which can be used to gauge the extent to which students, adults, and parents have the network of positive and supportive relationships they need.
Equity of Access to Learning
Experiences and Success Supports

• All students need access to courses of study linked to college and career readiness standards and state university admission requirements, they also need the academic, social and emotional supports necessary to succeed in them.

• Adults in the school need access to organizational structures and professional learning opportunities, which enable the enhancement of their skills.

• Employ cultural navigators- the more we learn about the influences of culture and community, the better we are able to engage youth with disabilities from CLD backgrounds in school and learning so that they stay in school, progress in school, and graduate.
Processes and structures to promote and enable continuous improvement

• School needs to be organized so students and adults, have the time, organizational structures, access to external peer networks and the supports needed to engage in continuous improvement of the school.

• Be able to create discipline and credit recovery polices and strategies that enabled earned recovery as the primary response (e.g. restorative practices and second chance opportunities to demonstrate competency) rather than punishment or leniency.
Professional Capacity

• Have deep content knowledge and mastery of the craft of teaching
• Be able to teach effectively and customize pedagogies (e.g. universal design) in classes with mixed levels of prior preparation, motivation and learning challenges (Differentiated Instruction)
• Know how to keep improving their craft and their ability to support students (including students who live in poverty and have experience trauma) and have access to opportunities and supports to do so
Professional Capacity

• Know how to work effectively in collaborative teams—both vertical by subject and horizontal by shared students, and work collectively at grade and school level to create consistent environment for student in terms of academic and behavioral expectations

• Know how to use formative and summative assessments to maximize student learning; use data both individually and collaboratively at teacher team, grade, and school level to drive continuous improvement
Beyond ABCs

Core Indicators
- Attendance
- Behavior
- Course Grade

School Climate

Social & Emotional Learning

Family Engagement

Student Engagement

Pre Employment Skills Training

Educational Attainment

Adult Success
Thank You

• Suggested additional Resources
  – www.every1graduates.org
  – www.attendanceworks.org
  – www.Transitionta.org

• Contact Information Loujeania Bost Baker
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