

Best Practices in Dropout Prevention

FACTS ON DROPOUT PREVENTION

Dropout prevention strategies vary greatly, ranging from a primary focus on improving overall academic achievement to identifying and addressing barriers to student success.^{3*} Another theme often seen in dropout prevention is personalization of the school experience for students, thus giving them a “sense of purpose” or belonging to encourage school completion.^{3 (161)}

Most experts agree on the need for early intervention as well, with prevention programs in some cases beginning as early as pre-K. Even so, research on dropout prevention at the elementary and middle school levels is sparse.⁵ While the exact rate of dropout is difficult to determine, nationally somewhere between 15 and 26% of students do not graduate from high school.^{5, 8, 12} In order to address this growing problem, we need to determine most effective approaches to dropout prevention.

Perspectives on Best Practices Status Variables

According to the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, status variables such as socioeconomic status and academic ability are the most difficult to ad-

dress and are unlikely to change.¹² Thus, the NCSET recommends that successful dropout prevention programs will focus on variables, such as school attendance and identification with or participation in school, which may be more responsive to intervention.

Meaningful Bonds

Researchers conducting a 1998 study found that the most successful, empirically based dropout prevention programs emphasize “creating meaningful bonds between students and teachers, connecting students to an attainable future, giving students opportunities to work while in school, providing academic assistance, and giving students high-status roles in the school.”^{3 (159)}

Career Training

In a more recent study, it was reported that the most effective dropout prevention strategies reported by secondary school principals include “involvement in career awareness, counseling, vocational education/technical training, and extracurricular activities.”^{6 (246)}

Effective Strategies

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University presents fifteen strategies for dropout prevention that have

been implemented successfully at all education levels and environments throughout the nation.⁸ These strategies and model programs fall under four categories: School and community; early interventions; basic core strategies; and making the most of instruction.

Interventions

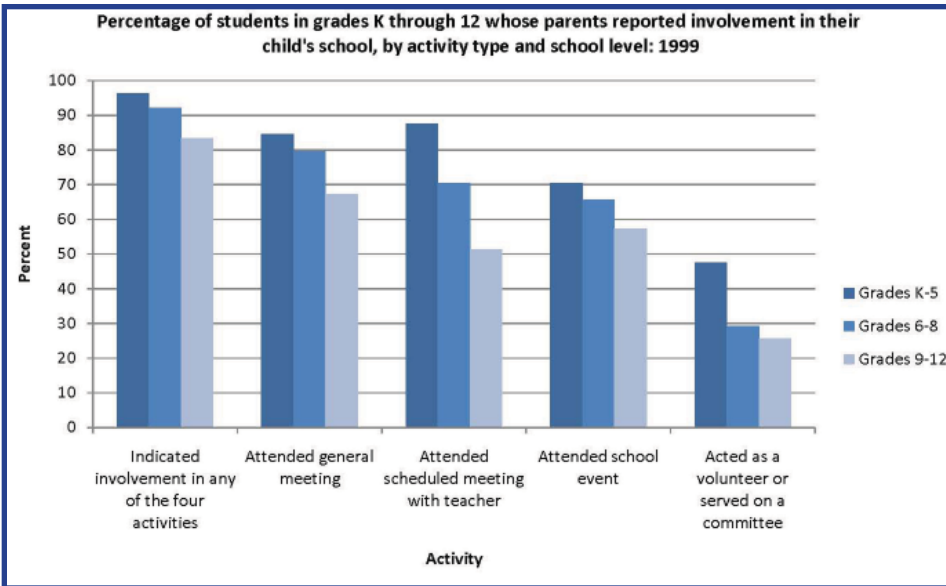
One research team offers five categories of effective interventions to prevent dropout: Personal/affective, academic, family outreach, school structure, and work-related.¹²

Student and Peer Level Interventions Building Self-Esteem

Programs that focus on enhancing self esteem, as well as counseling and classes aimed at improving interpersonal relations, offer students interpersonal resources that contribute to academic success.¹²

Mentoring/Tutoring

Both of these activities offer students the opportunity for a one-to-one relationship focused on interpersonal development or academics. Additionally, tutoring has been shown to be an effective practice for addressing specific student needs in a number of areas of academic competency.⁸



Research shows a positive relationship between family engagement and academic performance. The above chart shows some activities in which parents may become involved. **Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Parent and Family Involvement in Education/Civic Involvement Survey (PFI/CI:1996) and Parent Survey (Parent:1999) of the National Household Education Surveys Program, 1996 & 1999 and the Child Trends Databank. (2003). (www.childtrends-databank.org/indicators/39parentalinvolvementinschools.cfm)

Active Learning

In an active learning environment, students are actively involved in the learning process, rather than passively receiving instruction. Educators are able to introduce new strategies for problem solving and creative ways to approach learning. Students who are engaged in this process are more likely to become lifelong learners.⁸

Individualized Instruction

Programs that foster individualized instruction enable educators to consider students' unique interests and learning experiences to create flexible, motivational teaching strategies.⁸ Not only can this enhance student motivation and engagement, but recognition of individual differences and experiences may be of particular service to those groups most at risk. For

example, one pair of researchers¹ found that teacher support was one of the most effective predictors of both problem behaviors and school engagement or "level of school meaningfulness" for Latino students.^{1 (61)}

Family Level Interventions

Early Childhood Interventions Early childhood interventions for children from infancy through age five provide opportunities for enhanced brain development, thus giving the child an effective head start on academic achievement.⁸ Providing families with the opportunity to involve their children in pre-K and early literacy development programs has a strong, positive effect on later academic success.

Active Learning as Intervention: Multiple Intelligence

There are a variety of active learning teaching strategies: cooperative learning, learning styles theory, multiple intelligences theory, and project-based learning.

The most commonly used learning theory in K-12 is Dr. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Dr. Gardner began his work in 1970 at Harvard University with Project Zero. Through this project he identified eight intelligences:

Verbal/linguistic

"Word Smart"

Logical/Mathematical

"Number/Reasoning Smart"

Musical

"Music Smart"

Visual/Spatial

"Picture Smart"

Bodily/Kinesthetic

"Body Smart"

Interpersonal

"People Smart"

Intrapersonal

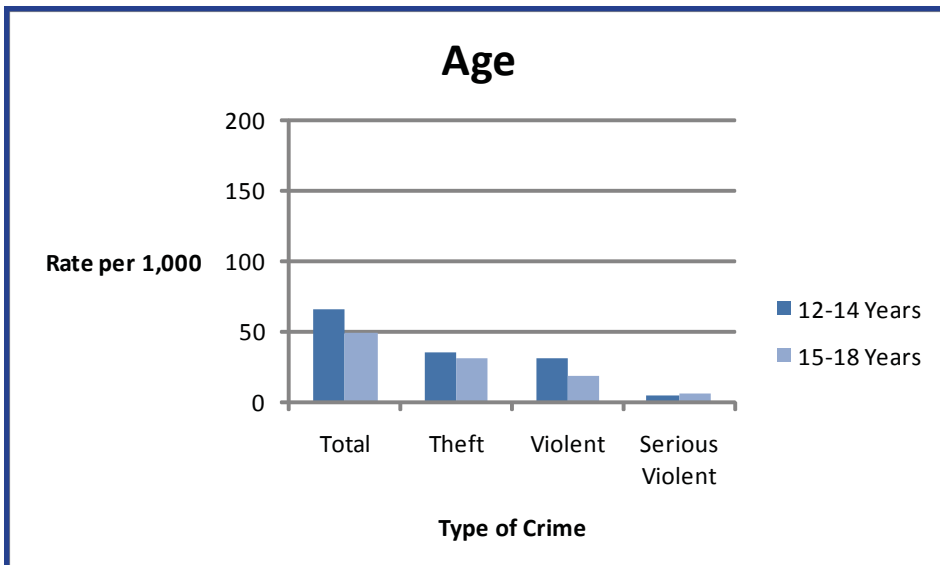
"Self Smart"

Naturalist

"Nature Smart"

Everyone has the ability to use each of the intelligences, but the one usually strongest becomes our preferred style.

Source: dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/active_learning/overview.htm and www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple_intelligences.htm



Violence prevention must be a part of any prevention plan. The above chart represents student-reported nonfatal crimes against students ages 12-18 at school per 1,000 students, by type of crime and selected student characteristics: 2005
Source: IES, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/crimeindicators2007/figures/fig_02_2.asp

Pre-K Programs and Early Literacy Development

Numerous studies have shown that preschool participation is significantly associated with more years of completed education^{9, 11}, higher rates of high school graduation,⁹ and lower rates of school dropout.¹¹

Moreover, a meta-analysis of the effects of early intervention programs on academic success highlights empirical findings that early childhood is the period when gaps in academic achievement begin, as well as indicating that early learning both facilitates and increases the motivation for future learning.¹⁰ Early interventions should also include a focus on reading and writing skills for low-achieving students.⁸

Family Engagement

Research has consistently shown

a direct, positive relationship between family engagement and children's academic achievement, regardless of socio-economic status or race/ethnicity.⁸

School Level Interventions Systemic Renewal

An ongoing process of evaluation in which schools evaluate their goals and objectives is imperative for systemic renewal.⁸ This type of evaluation allows schools to make innovative system changes, or even whole school reform, often based on Title I funding.

Safe Learning Environments

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2005 there were approximately a million and a half non-fatal crimes at schools involving children aged 12 to 18.² These crimes included thefts, assaults, and serious vio-

lent crime. Bullying, availability of drugs, and weapons also pose problems for students.

Violence prevention and conflict resolution must be part of any school violence prevention plan. Development of a safe learning environment also includes a focus on academic achievement, positive peer to peer and staff to student relationships, and family and community involvement.⁸

Alternative Schooling

For youth identified as at-risk of dropping out, having the option of alternative schools, with programs focused on students' individual social and academic needs, may improve graduation rates.⁸

Furthermore, research indicates that alternative schools with low student-teacher ratios and a focus on education as opposed to discipline can effectively reduce dropout rates, particularly if these schools are solution-focused or strengths-based.⁴

After-School Opportunities

Because many students at-risk of dropout lack opportunities for intellectual stimulation outside of the school day, the after-school and summer enrichment programs provided by many schools maintain student interest in learning as well as positively affecting academic success and social behavior. The constructive activities offered in these programs also provide a positive alternative to gang involvement and other negative environments.⁸

Resource Development

Professional development opportunities for teachers working with at-risk youth are important in that they allow teachers to feel supported in their work and they provide a means of continued skill development in working with students at risk of academic failure.

Schools that offer current educational technology, such as computers and trained instructors, are able to provide alternate methods of learning tailored to student needs and strengths as well as addressing multiple intelligences, better engaging students in the learning process, and allowing teachers to better individualize instruction.

Career and Technology educational

programs serve to better prepare students for the workplace. These school-to-work programs integrate academics with vocational training, thus allowing students to apply their knowledge to real world interests.⁸

Community Level Interventions School-Community Collaboration

With true school-community collaboration, all groups and agencies within the community are accountable for the establishment and maintenance of the strong infrastructures necessary for quality education. This collaboration may involve not only the school and social service agencies, but also places of worship, libraries, the media, area businesses, and indi-

vidual homes and families.⁸

Service-Learning

Service learning programs provide students with a meaningful way to connect service experiences within their community with academic learning. This model of active participation in the community through the school promotes personal and social growth, civic responsibility, and even career development.

Effective service learning includes not only a service component, but also time for reflection, student planning, and a variety of tools. Programs that incorporate all of these elements can serve as means for effective school reform.⁸

Close up: Implementing Service-Learning as Best Practice⁷

Learn and Serve America is a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, an independent federal agency created to connect Americans of all ages and backgrounds with opportunities to give back to their communities and their nation. The organization defines service-learning as a unique opportunity for America's young people — from kindergarten to university students — to get involved with their communities in a tangible way by integrating service projects with classroom

learning. Service-learning engages students in the educational process, using what they learn

in the classroom to solve real-life problems. Students not only learn about democracy and citizenship, they become actively contributing citizens and community members through the service they perform. Service-learning can be applied across all subjects and grade levels; it can involve a single student or group of students, a classroom or an entire school. Students build character and become active participants as they work with others to create service projects in areas like education, public safety, and the environment.



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