Advancing the "Colorado Graduates" Agenda:
Understanding the Dropout Problem and Mobilizing to Meet the Graduation Challenge

Martha Abele Mac Iver , Robert Balfanz, Vaughan Byrnes
The Center for Social Organization of Schools
Johns Hopkins University

"About 30 percent of Colorado high school students don't graduate. Less than half of the black, Latino and American Indian students who start high school in Colorado actually finish. Our goal: cut the drop-out rate in half within 10 years." Governor Bill Ritter, Jr.

The ambitious goal set by Colorado's governor to address the state's dropout problem is a model for the nation. Helping thousands of young people to receive their high school diplomas instead of leaving school without them is a crucial step in improving the quality of life for all Colorado residents.

Accomplishing this goal will require focused attention on dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery -- particularly in the schools and districts with large numbers of dropouts. As researchers at Johns Hopkins University have pointed out in earlier publications, understanding the dropout problem in a community is an important first step in developing and implementing plans to reduce the number of dropouts and increase the graduation rate.

The research reported here was conducted as a foundational analysis for the work of the Colorado Graduates Initiative (CGI), a partnership of several education advocacy organizations and other non-profit organizations seeking to assure that districts and schools succeed in accomplishing the goal of cutting the state's dropout rate in half within the next ten years. Created in January 2008, the current CGI partnership includes the Colorado Children's Campaign, the Partnership for Families and Children (and the associated National Center for School Engagement), and Colorado Youth for a Change, together with representatives from the Colorado Department of Education, several Colorado school districts, and the Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. Funding for this research was provided by the Donnell-Kay Foundation and the Piton Foundation.

This research focused first on the statewide distribution of dropouts, and then on five of the districts having some of the largest number of dropouts, using both aggregate school level data from the Colorado Department of Education and individual level data from each of the five districts. In short, this report presents several keys to addressing Colorado's graduation challenge:

- We can locate where the dropout problem is concentrated in the state (by districts and schools).

- We can identify which students are unlikely to graduate without interventions (through routinely collected district administrative data).

- We have interventions that can keep students on track to on-time graduation.

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[1] http://www.ontheissues.org/Governor/Bill_Ritter_Education.htm

[2] R. Balfanz, J. Fox, J. Bridgeland, & M. McNaught, M. (2008). *Grad Nation: A Guidebook to Help Communities Tackle the Dropout Crisis.* Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance; R. Balfanz (2007). *What Your Community Can Do to End Its Dropout Crisis: Learnings from Research and Practice.* Baltimore, MD: Center for Social Organization of Schools.

Findings

Analyses of de-identified student level data indicated that the 2006-07 dropouts in each of the five districts were displaying behavioral warning signals several years prior to the dropout outcome. While not perfect predictors of a dropout outcome, these indicators distinguished dropouts from graduates rather dramatically.

Among the 2006-07 dropouts (with prior data) in the five districts:

- More than three in four had failed one or more semester courses in ninth grade (compared to between one-fifth and one-third of graduates with the same indicator)

- A large majority (in four of the five districts) displayed patterns of chronic absenteeism

- Nearly half (in four of the five districts) had been suspended at least once during the previous four years (compared to about half as many among graduates)

A second set of analyses in three of the five districts examined outcomes for all ninth graders in 2003-04, whose on-time graduation year would have been 2007 (the "Class of 2007"). These students could have dropped out any time from 2003 to 2007. (By contrast, the dropouts of 2006-07 could have been from several different cohorts of ninth graders.) Among this 2003-04 cohort of ninth graders (Class of 2007) in the three districts:

- The percentage of students with an on-time graduation outcome in 2007 declined steadily for each semester failure in ninth grade.

- Just 22% to 29% of those with one or more semester failures graduated on time

Current Risk Indicators in Ninth Grade and Middle School

The percentage of current ninth grade students displaying risk indicators in these five districts varies widely, but a substantial number of students are falling off track even in districts with lower poverty rates. The percentage of ninth graders with at least one semester course failure ranges from 35% to 62%. Chronic absenteeism among ninth graders ranges from 19% to 64%. There is less variation in the percentage of ninth graders with at least one suspension (13% to 20%).

Despite wide variation at the district level, the risk indicators are also widespread at the middle school level. Between 10% and 43% of middle school students display a problem with chronic absenteeism. Suspension rates range from 9% to 23%. The percentage of students in the first year of middle school who have failed the equivalent of a full year's course ranges from 9% to 23%. A third of sixth grade students are exhibiting at least one of the early warning indicators (poor attendance, behavior problems, course failure) in two of the districts, and as many as half appear to be at risk in another district.

The extent to which current students in these five districts are displaying early warning signals of a potential dropout outcome suggests the need for timely interventions.

Recommendations

The findings from this study clearly indicate the need for focused efforts on dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery. These recommendations focus mostly on prevention and intervention. Most dropouts are giving warning signals years in advance, which provide clear guidance for implementing interventions aimed at keeping students on track to graduation. Implementation of focused and integrated dropout prevention strategies at the middle school and ninth grade levels should reduce the percentage of students needing more expensive alternative settings.

In particular, we would argue that significant reductions in the dropout rate will require:

- Reducing the number of students failing high school courses, thereby increasing the percentage of students earning high school credits on time

- Decreasing absenteeism, which is strongly linked to course failure

- Addressing root causes of high absenteeism (and intervening effectively during the middle school years to increase attendance)

- Providing academic interventions in middle school so that students enter ninth grade prepared for high school course

While these interventions would also affect students who could potentially graduate without special measures (students with early warning signals who manage to graduate on time), such an approach would also yield beneficial effects (in improved readiness for post-secondary education) for the "false positives" thus identified.

We recommend a three-pronged response plan be implemented in middle and high schools, with leadership from the district superintendents and school boards and supportive guidance from central office administrators. This attendance, behavior, and course failure (the "ABCs") response plan calls for district and school leaders to:

- Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of existing district and school level policies and practices related to attendance, behavior, and course grading at the middle and high school levels and to credit recovery opportunities for students who are behind in credits and/or have already dropped out. This would also include analysis of district capacity to recover the large percentage of students who are failing to finish high school.

- Build consensus among school leaders and faculties on the need for research-based practices (e.g., teacher teaming, project learning, different types of grading systems, opportunities to make up missed work) that will help to prevent dropout outcomes through reducing absences, suspensions, and course failures and providing recovery opportunities for students before they drop out.

- Create integrated whole school reforms and school-level student support structures that will assure appropriate, timely interventions to keep all students on track to on-time graduation. These support structures will require district-supported, user-friendly, real-time data systems that will allow schools to implement early warning systems and tiered interventions for struggling students (together with comprehensive, whole school reform that assures high quality, engaging instruction in every classroom, every day).

We recognize that many dropout prevention strategies have already been attempted in these districts, and that components of the following recommendations are already in place. Our emphasis in these recommendations is on the need for a coherent, systematic, integrated approach that assures that all reforms are in place simultaneously and no student falls through the cracks. Recommendations in the full report offer specific details about how an early warning system and tiered intervention system can be implemented in middle and high schools.

This is a doable task, even in times of scarce resources. The dividends – in more high school graduates who are making a contribution to society – are well worth the effort and investments required.