

Technical Assistance Response on Dropout Prevention

Question:

How can a state education agency roll out an early warning system for high school principals to use in identifying students at risk of dropping out of school?

The following provides information about rolling out a statewide Early Warning and Early Intervention System (EW/EI System) and represents a summary scan of information about various state initiatives and practices. First, considerations for rolling out the system at the state level are presented. Second, information on how Minnesota rolled out its dropout prevention program is provided. Third, descriptions about other states' dropout prevention strategies are also included. Fourth and finally, information of National High School Center publications focused on Early Warning Systems is provided. This information provides some guidance about how a statewide EW/EI System is introduced and designed.

Rolling Out an Early Warning and Early Intervention System

Introduction

The following information has been divided into two sections. The first section describes key components for implementing a new initiative in schools successfully. In the second section, the description is applied to the particular facets of implementing an Early Warning System and intervention protocol for students at risk of dropping out of high school. Our intent is to give key questions for state-level administrators to consider as they support school-level implementation. We conclude with some examples of state implementation of dropout prevention policies.

I. Key Components of Implementation

Successful implementation requires capacity, resources, and accountability in schools. Clearly, these factors are interrelated, but for the purposes of this discussion, we describe them separately.

- ◆ **Capacity** includes the knowledge, skills, and ability for individuals and organizations to carry out the roles and responsibilities necessary to implement an initiative. Capacity relates to those at the state, district, and school levels, all of which play critical, yet different, roles in the implementation process.
- ◆ **Resources** include money, expertise, tools, and professional development. It is important for these to be available not only during the planning and design processes but also throughout the implementation process. Ability to access resources throughout implementation enhances individuals' and organizations' ability to respond to changes and refine processes as experience is gained and needs are clarified.

- ◆ **Accountability** refers to the end-goal of an initiative (e.g., to lower dropout rates) and the indicators by which the success of an initiative will be judged as it is implemented. Effective systems of accountability are designed to provide information for a variety of purposes. Considerations about how stakeholders will be held accountable should be included with how stakeholders will be able to use the data and information gathered to make decisions about progress, refinement, and other aspects of the implementation process. These data should be useful to those at the school, district, and state levels.

II. Implementation Considerations for an Early Warning and Early Intervention System (EW/EI System)

Early Warning and Early Intervention Systems are relatively new initiatives for state education agencies (SEAs). Examples of how an SEA rolls out the implementation of such a system are limited. In at least one state, the SEA chose to pilot the program in high schools (see the Minnesota example below). This option allows an SEA to focus on a small number of schools, mitigate challenges of state-level capacity, and apply universal policies to all schools. Using the pilot as a collaboration between schools and the SEA gives an opportunity for feedback and refinement as stakeholders at all levels learn through implementation what works and what needs to change. The pilot allows the SEA to test the process before it is rolled out to a larger audience.

Key questions for consideration:

- ◆ How will schools be identified for participation?
 - Will some schools be required to participate?
 - Will other schools be able to voluntarily participate (in addition to those that may or may not be required to participate)?

Capacity

State capacity to support the EW/EI System should be an early consideration. Selecting a number of schools to participate in the EW/EI System should be balanced with the SEA's capacity to support implementation and fulfill the role it has designed.

To build district- and school-level capacity, it is important to address the understanding and knowledge of the individuals who are expected to implement the EW/EI System. A plan to introduce the EW/EI System initiative and provide ongoing capacity-building activities is critical. Ongoing capacity building may include convening stakeholders to share practices; facilitating professional learning communities; and offering one-on-one assistance, coaching, and technical assistance or workshop-style professional development as needed. Capacity building is ongoing and should be adapted to the needs of those implementing the EW/EI System.

The EW/EI System should be launched through presentations and written materials. Stakeholders need an adequate introduction to the processes and expectations. Next, the SEA has a choice to develop one-on-one working groups with districts/high schools or to convene a learning community among all high schools/districts participating in the program. Key considerations for SEA staff should be their capacity to maintain a number of individual relationships and transfer information and lessons learned from one high school to another. Additionally, the cost and distance among the

Dropout Prevention

implementation sites may make regular meetings prohibitive. Regardless of the strategy, communication between the SEA and the implementation sites must be ongoing, routine, and collaborative.

Key questions for consideration:

- ◆ How will the EW/EI System be introduced?
- ◆ Who will participate in the EW/EI System?
- ◆ What roles will SEA-, district-, and school-level stakeholders play?
- ◆ What capacity-building strategies will be used?
 - Introductory and informational?
 - Ongoing?
- ◆ How will schools plan for the EW/EI System?
 - How flexible is the plan?
 - Can it change over time?
- ◆ How will expertise be developed and shared?
 - Sharing practices?
 - Collaboration among schools with the SEA as a convener?
 - Other?

Resources

Developing and implementing an EW/EI System takes resources. At the very minimum, school staff must be able to identify key data, input data, and efficiently and routinely access student-level reports. This requires a database system that is accessible to staff. Without such a system and accessibility, the EW/EI System may create unnecessary burden on a school. Additionally, it requires principal attention and staff time not only to obtain the data but also to analyze the data and make decisions about the students identified. Developing a protocol and process for identifying, entering, accessing, analyzing, and following up on data and decisions is critical. Any school plan should explain how individuals will distribute this workload. Additionally, the state may want to consider allocating financial incentives or resources for individuals and/or schools participating. Financial resources could be used for individuals' time or for the creation of data management systems.

Key questions for consideration:

- ◆ What infrastructure is needed to routinely and efficiently collect and analyze data at the school level?
- ◆ What funding, professional development, or tools will be available to state-, district-, and school-level stakeholders?
- ◆ How will available resources interact with implementation?

Accountability

The ultimate goal of an EW/EI System is to reduce or eliminate the number of students who drop out of high school. Still, identifying process and progress indicators to be used at the state, district, and school levels can help enhance the EW/EI System. Identifying these indicators will support school- and district-level reflection on the data and enhance the ability of individuals to identify indicators that have stronger correlations to students dropping out (or not dropping out) within their context. At the state level, it may allow the SEA to refine indicators (and possibly reduce the amount of data needed to lower the data collection burden) as stronger indicators surface. Collaboration among the state, district, and school levels may strengthen this process and buy-in.

Key questions for consideration:

- ◆ What information will be used to monitor the implementation and impact of the EW/EI System?
- ◆ How will indicators be identified?
 - SEA determined?
 - Collaborative?
 - Emerging evidence?
- ◆ How will the SEA initiative accommodate the unique contexts of individual districts and schools (e.g., some indicators may be more significant than others)?

The Minnesota Example

The following is an excerpt from the Minnesota Department of Education's presentation on developing an Early Warning System for students at risk of dropping out. The state piloted the program initiative in several high schools. The system of implementation was structured so that the schools learned from one another and collaboratively developed a process with the SEA.

Excerpt from the Dropout Prevention, Retention and Graduation Initiative (presented by Cammy Lehr from the Minnesota Department of Education on September 26, 2006, and retrieved from the Minnesota Department of Education Web site: <http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/groups/Dropout/documents/Presentation/030982.pdf>). As you will see, the state addresses many of the capacity issues.

Schools Use a Series of Checklists and Templates to Guide the Planning Process

- ◆ Checklist 1: Getting Started (due 8/31)
 - Start-up activities, gathering relevant data, needs assessment
- ◆ Checklist 2: Data Synthesis and Implementation Focus (due 9/30)
 - Reflection & synthesis of data; articulate implementation focus
- ◆ Checklist 3: Implementation Detail and Local Evaluation Plan (due 12/31)
 - Implementation detail (what, who, timeline, etc.); evaluation plan with goals, objectives and indicators

CHECKLIST 1: Getting started

- ◆ Establish local leadership team membership
- ◆ Develop a communication plan
- ◆ Plan and provide professional development (early orientation)
 - Identify other groups in your school and community already working on activities related to dropout prevention
 - Gather data to inform programming decisions (total and disaggregated by groups)
 - Student enrollment
 - Graduation rate
 - Attendance rate
 - Dropout rate
 - Additional data linked to risk factors (disciplinary referrals, numbers of suspensions, percentages of students failing classes or behind in credits, students with chemical dependency)
- ◆ Conduct Needs Assessment
 - School Climate/Environment Assessment
 - 10 Dropout Prevention Strategies Assessment
 - Additional needs assessment data (locally developed ways of assessing student, school and community needs with respect to preventing dropping out such as talking with students, community focus groups, bullying surveys)

- ◆ Assessing Dropout Prevention Strategies
- ◆ Is the strategy in place? Yes or No?
- ◆ Describe the approach or program reflecting the strategy
- ◆ Indicate the level of intervention: Universal, Selected, Indicated
- ◆ Describe the impact of the approach or program
- ◆ Based on supporting evidence, how effective is the program?

CHECKLIST 2: Data synthesis and implementation focus

- ◆ What does your data tell you?
 - Demographics, enrollment, attendance, graduation rates
- ◆ School climate assessment
- ◆ Who are your most at-risk students and what are indicators of risk?
- ◆ How is your school planning to respond? (incorporate information on strategies)

CHECKLIST 3: Implementation detail and local evaluation plan

- ◆ Provide information on what the school will implement to improve student engagement, learning and graduation rates; delivery design; tailoring; resources needed; who will be responsible; timeline; types of costs.
- ◆ Local evaluation plan (goals, objectives, indicators, data collection schedule)

Where do we go from here?

- ◆ Continued technical assistance
- ◆ Programming Guide
- ◆ Web site up and running
- ◆ Newsletters posted online
- ◆ Personal contact with steering committee members to gain input and utilize expertise
- ◆ Next Steering Committee and District Committee Meetings in October

This initiative...

- ◆ Is a process
- ◆ Is a team effort

- ◆ Is a learning experience
- ◆ Involves multiple partners with expertise
- ◆ Includes a vision for extended use beyond the 7 participating districts
- ◆ Is an exciting opportunity!

The intent of this journey is not just to raise rates of graduation, but to engage children and youth in school, and help them graduate with the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully meet the challenges life brings after completing high school.

Additional information about the Minnesota initiative can be found at the Minnesota Department of Education Web site (http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Academic_Excellence/Dropout_Prevent_Reten_Grad_Init/index.html).

Implementation of State Dropout Prevention Policies

Many states have targeted dropout prevention as a critical need. A variety of policies are being implemented across the United States. The following are a few examples of how states have chosen to roll out dropout prevention initiatives.

Louisiana

Louisiana has taken a multi-tiered approach to implementing a dropout prevention system. First, the state is targeting specific districts by allocating \$1 million to support 27 dropout prevention and dropout recovery programs in 21 districts serving 754 in-school students and 275 out of school students. Second, the state is examining factors that are unique to specific contexts in the state and types of schools. The state developed a working group comprising representatives from the Department of Education, districts, and high schools to support the state Early Warning System design for all schools. Additionally, the state has invested in conducting a historical analysis of student data to identify risk factors among different types of schools (e.g., rural, urban). The information from this analysis will support districts and high schools in the early identification of at-risk students. (Source: Louisiana High School Redesign Implementation Update Web site: <http://www.louisianaschools.net/LDE/uploads/10159.doc>)

Additional materials

Dropout Prevention Presentation: <http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/uploads/10486.ppt#279,23,CHARACTERISTICS%20OF%20SUCCESSFUL%20DROPOUT%20RECOVERY%20PROGRAMS>

Minnesota

As part of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, Title I part h dropout prevention grant, the Minnesota Department of Education chose to pilot the initiative. Selected high and middle schools were required to

- ◆ develop a comprehensive dropout prevention model;

- ◆ develop student-level and school environment assessment tools to enhance the development of effective programming;
- ◆ increase statewide and local coordination to address dropout prevention;
- ◆ provide support and technical assistance for local education agencies; and
- ◆ increase the likelihood of continued implementation of successful dropout prevention components.

In 2007, the several high schools volunteered to participate in a pilot of an Early Warning System to support these efforts. (Source: Minnesota Department of Education Web site: http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Academic_Excellence/Dropout_Prevent_Reten_Grad_Init/index.html)

Kentucky

At the prompting of the state board of education, the Kentucky SEA examined the issues related to dropouts in the state. In response, the state developed a few resources/tools aimed at dropout prevention.

The Kentucky Department of Education developed a guide to be used by all schools, which has information about identification and prevention strategies at the elementary, middle, and high school levels (for more information see <http://www.ihdi.uky.edu/dropout-prevention/listofarticles.asp>).

At the student level, the state passed the No Pass, No Drive law in 2007 (for more information see <http://education.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/5C8395B8-EFB2-4886-8FFB-A682D5570060/0/NoPassNoDrivePowerPoint.pdf>). Students who are academically deficient, have excessive absences, or drop out may be denied a license to drive or have their license revoked.

National High School Center Publications

The following publications may support your efforts in developing an Early Warning System at the state, district, and school levels.

Heppen, J., & Bowles Therriault, S. (2008). *Developing an early warning system guide*. Retrieved September 2, 2008, from the National High School Center Web site: http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/IssueBrief_EarlyWarningSystemsGuide_081408.pdf.

This guide discusses the factors that help predict the probability that individual students will eventually drop out of high school prior to graduating and includes step-by-step instructions for building an early warning system. (National High School Center description)

Jerald, C. (2006). *Identifying potential dropouts: Key lessons for building an early warning data system*. Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc. Retrieved September 2, 2008, from the Achieve Web site: http://www.achieve.org/files/FINAL-dropouts_0.pdf.

This report summarizes the research on the factors that put students at greater risk of dropping out and the relative success of methods of predicting which students will drop out and proposes a two-phase process for building an effective and efficient early warning data system. According to the author, "If policymakers heed the most current research, avoid the mistakes of the past, and invest in sufficient up-front 'research and development' dollars, they can build data systems to identify a good many students on the path to dropping out early enough to make a difference." (Author description)

NOTE: Since the original technical assistance response was developed, other more recent resources may be available on our Web site: www.betterhighschools.org.