THE PROBLEM IS REAL

Why districts with 'good' and 'bad' graduation rates alike need dropout recovery, and what it takes to make it work.

Graduation
Alliance™

> ## " *Dear Educator,*
>
> *While America's high school graduation rate has continued to inch upward in recent years, far too many students still fail to graduate. The dropout problem is real and when a problem is real, it is not enough to simply reflect on it. Action must be taken to help these young men and women get back into a program that will allow them to successfully graduate...* "

The email was part of a campaign to raise awareness about the need for more recovery options for students who cannot or will not return to a traditional high school campus.

Its premise was simple: The dropout problem is real and we all have a real obligation to do whatever we can to address it.

The response to that message was exceptionally positive. Hundreds of educators across the nation followed the links to additional information about the economic, social and ethical costs of permitting even a single student to leave school without a diploma. Many of them additionally downloaded an informational graphic designed to help explain the economic cost incurred by communities across the nation when students leave school before graduation — a vital piece of information for those seeking to help policymakers and fellow education leaders see the value of services for over-aged and under-credited students.

The response certainly wasn't a surprise to the staff at Graduation Alliance. Since 2006, the organization has been working to expand educational opportunities for at-risk students across the nation and raise awareness of what it takes to do so. While Graduation Alliance works with non-profits, community colleges, workforce boards and private school students to achieve this goal, it's largest body of partners, by far, have been public school leaders — many of them

initially reached through messages just like the "dear educator" email that went out to administrators throughout the country in the spring of 2017.

"If there's one thing we've learned," said Graduation Alliance chief academic officer Rebekah Richards, "it is that school leaders are thirsty for information about what they can do to help their students. And if you think about it, that makes a lot of sense."

District leaders are almost always former teachers and administrators, Richards noted.

"These folks are genuinely in this for their students and their communities," she said, "so they're naturally eager to learn what they can do to help even more students."

That doesn't mean every school leader is excited, or even interested, in learning about the prevention and recovery of students who have fallen off-track for graduation. "To some extent, that's a natural effect of the old adage of 'what gets measured gets done,'" said Richards. "Purely from the standpoint of improving the metrics by which schools are most often measured, most notably in four-year cohorts, there's little advantage to providing services for students who fall behind, and the further behind they fall the less incentives there are to do something about it."

Complicating matters, our nation has come to accept the idea of "good" and "bad" graduation rates. For years, political and education leaders have publicly pined for a 90 percent national graduation rate — a noble but arbitrary goal that suggests districts that have already met that standard are doing just fine.

Indeed, that seems to be what one administrator was thinking when he received the email.

"Our graduation rate," he wrote in response, "has been between 97 and 99 percent for years, so it's not 'real' everywhere."

There is no cause for anyone to question the administrator's dedication to his students. A search of state education records shows that, indeed, his district — in a city with a median annual income of more than $125,000, in which less than 1 percent of families are living under the poverty line, and where taxpayers spend $4,000 more per year per student than the national average — has one of the highest graduation rates in the country. In the way we've come to think about such things, he's doing "good."

And yet, even in what many fellow educators would argue are some of the most ideal conditions imaginable, that administrator's district doesn't get every student across the finish line on time. In any given year, every freshman classroom in that administrator's district might include a boy or girl who, for one reason or another, won't graduate on time or at all.

In the midst of such overwhelming privilege, is it acceptable to leave one student in every classroom behind? When it comes to ensuring students are able to obtain the absolute minimum level of education needed to have a fighting chance in today's economy, is there ever an "acceptable" level of loss?

In a word: No.

...the problem *is* real and *every* student matters.

That's certainly not to say districts that have continuously worked to increase graduation rates have failed to accomplish something great. As graduation rates increase, after all, every single rising percentage point represents real people who have a better shot at a better life. But no one should be content.

And they don't have to be.

From districts of privilege that graduate exceptionally high percentages of their students to those battling socio-economic obstacles that make a 90-plus-percent graduation rate a distant dream, there isn't a school community in the nation that cannot do more to help over-aged and under-credited students — both those still in school and those who have left — get to graduation day.

And the good news is that every district can do more. Not just those with significant privileges, but even those where resources have been stretched impossibly thin.

Some districts might be able to do this by themselves. Most will need some help. All can take advantage of best practices for student support, accountability and funding that make at-risk services a no-risk proposition. With that in mind, every school leader should reject the idea that "we do enough" or that "we're already doing everything we can." With the right practices and the right help, everyone can do more.

Because yes, the problem *is* real and *every* student matters.

88%

DISTRICTS OFFERING CREDIT RECOVERY PROGRAM

72%

PROVIDE SMALLER CLASS SIZES

63%

OFFER EARLY GRADUATION OPTION

55%

OFFER SELF-PACED COURSES

Here's the good news: There are very few school districts left in the United States that don't offer some sort of program to students at risk of leaving school before earning a diploma. As far back as 2011, in fact, some 88 percent of districts were offering a credit recovery program, 72 percent were serving at-risk students with smaller class sizes, 63 percent were offering early graduation options, and 55 percent had made self-paced courses available to struggling students.[i]

The bad news is that, despite such efforts to provide support for at-risk students, on-time graduation rates aren't rising and dropout rates aren't falling as quickly as most administrators would like. Across the nation, nearly one in five students still fail to graduate on time and, quite troublingly, the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicates that less than 40 percent of the nation's high school students are adequately prepared for college or careers upon graduation.[ii] Meanwhile, the status dropout rate, which has dropped precipitously since 2000, may have flattened in recent years; the most recently available national data puts it at 6.5 percent.[iii]

In part, this pervasive problem is a result of the fact that many school leaders have come to believe that the only acceptable strategy for moving the needle on these numbers is prevention — and that once a prevention program is in place, they're doing all they can to address the problem. Both of these beliefs are fallacies.

Firstly, because at-risk students are facing myriad social, economic, academic and health-related obstacles, prevention is necessarily a multi-faceted endeavor. Not only is it insufficient to have only one strategy (a robust prevention program includes credit recovery, tutoring, summer school, remediation classes, guided study hall, alternative schools and after-school programs) but it's often not enough to have only one type of each of these programs.

A program that takes place immediately after school, for instance, might help some at-risk students, but not those who have after-school jobs — and particularly not those for whom economic situations make such jobs a priority. So, in cases in which administrators are aware that at-risk students are unable to attend programs immediately after school, they might also consider expanding such programs to include night classes, like those that have been instituted in Mobile, Alabama.[iv] Likewise, credit recovery via self-paced, asynchronous courses might work for students with the right combination of focus and initiative, but not for others.[v] Some students will recover credit better and faster working independently, some in more traditional classroom settings, and some in computer labs with roving mentors.

The differences in how individual students take to a single credit recovery strategy are revealed in the comments of Dina, a student in Washington state whose district employed an age-old credit recovery strategy: photocopied "course packets" that include written lessons and multiple choice tests.

"A lot of the kids I went to school with did really good with the packets, and some of them joked that it was really easy for them, so it was like getting credit for not having to work so hard," Dina said. "That made me really frustrated, because I was a slow reader and a lot of times I had trouble understanding what I was reading, so the packets weren't easy for me. They were really hard and so I ended up just giving up."

Secondly, it stands to reason that if prevention was a perfect solution, and given that so many districts are engaged in it, there would be no dropout epidemic. Because there is no school district of any significant size that does not have some students who leave school before graduation — and because in most districts students leave in substantial numbers — it's clear prevention is simply not enough. Yet only about a third of districts have programs in place to stay in contact with students who have dropped out,[vi] and even fewer offer any specific services to such students, let alone services designed to help address the proliferation of the obstacles that caused students to leave in the first place. One study of dropout recovery efforts among schools in Texas, for instance, showed that only about 62 percent of programs were engaging in "promising practices," let alone best practices, for re-engaging students.[vii]

And yet the overwhelming majority of individuals who have left school before graduation say they would like to return and would do so if the conditions were right.[viii] Indeed, in some cases, in which the obstacle that prompted a dropout event has come and gone, the right condition can be a simple invitation.

"When I was a junior, I was bullied really badly by a girl who was a senior in my high school," said Kiana, a student in Michigan. "I always thought that whenever that girl graduated maybe I would consider coming back, but at the start of the next year I didn't really know how to register for classes again, and I was honestly really embarrassed that I'd given up when things got hard. No one contacted me, so I just figured my chance had passed."

It hadn't. When Kiana's district did begin to work in earnest to reach out to students who have left school before graduation, they found that she was ready, willing and excited to return.

Students like Kiana are the low-hanging fruit of dropout recovery. In most cases, of course, an invitation alone isn't enough, and re-engagement is a process of climbing higher into the trees. That means not just inviting students back, but inviting them back to programs specifically intended for students who are "dropping back in." Such programs have been shown to be exceptionally effective; in Boston, for instance, 54 percent of students who re-enrolled in school directly in a high school were still attending a year later, compared to 72 percent who re-enrolled through a specialized re-engagement center.[ix]

Building a robust re-engagement strategy isn't easy, but it's a challenge district administrators across the nation have learned is worth it — even for a relatively small number of students.

Indeed, while Graduation Alliance facilitates many programs in large districts with hundreds and even thousands of individuals who are eligible for re-engagement, it also works with some districts in which only a few students are enrolled at a time. Its programmatic offerings, however, don't change. In large and small programs alike, students receive the same combination of flexibility, social support and academic interventions.

When those attributes are present, former students will both figuratively and literally line up for an opportunity to return. Indeed, when contacted and invited to re-engage in a flexible and supportive learning environment, more than 80 percent of contacted students request re-enrollment.[x]

Put simply: Districts that do not have an active re-engagement strategy are leaving students outside who would very much like to come back in.

Bringing Them Back

What do school leaders need to launch a recovery program? For starters, they need shift widespread assumptions about disengaged students that have resulted in a world in which the majority of individuals who are listed as "dropouts" are never again contacted by their district. So long as these individuals still live within a district's borders and remain eligible for re-enrollment under local laws, they shouldn't be written off as lost causes, but rather should be considered presently disengaged.

Next, they need to begin the process of inviting disengaged students to return to school. In the process of doing so, districts should ask those students about the conditions that prompted them to leave. And because conditions shift quickly following a drop-out event, districts should also ask about the conditions that would be necessary for a student to return. Additionally, it is vital to remember that students who have left school before graduation do not cease having long-term goals, nor have they stopped caring about how to connect their current life circumstances to those goals; inquiring about and understanding these goals is key to the process of offering the right formula for a student to return.

To do any of this, of course, districts must be able to find their former students, and this can be a significant challenge, even with the benefit of a robust student records file. In part this is because many disengaged students retain hard feelings about their districts, and will ignore even the most well-intentioned of contact attempts. And, of course, students and their parents or guardians may have moved, changed phone numbers, and even changed their social media account handles. Indeed, one of the most common historic obstacles to initiating successful dropout recovery programs happens long before any social or pedagogical interventions can even begin: A study of early dropout prevention and recovery programs in California, for instance, found that many were ineffective not for a lack of adequate educational strategies, but because dropouts simply did not know about the program. More than 20 years later, a program intended to recover and graduate thousands of students in Texas was facing the very same problem. It had fallen far short of its goal, primarily because of trouble tracking down dropouts.[xi]

For these reasons, a simple call-and-mail contact effort directed to a student's last-known phone number and address isn't enough. A robust reengagement campaign should also include calls and emails to all emergency contacts, queries to known peers who are still actively enrolled, searches of public records databases, and reviews of criminal and civil court records. Districts should also leverage the power of both traditional and social media to raise community awareness of the desire to recover disengaged students. This may include mailers, fliers, posters, articles in local newspapers and municipal newsletters, spots on local television stations, public service announcements on local radio stations, notices in utility bills and social media campaigns.

Once contacted, though, the process of re-engagement is not over. Indeed, it has only just begun, because re-engagement is a gradual and continual process that begins when a district decides to commit to bringing a student back to school and does not end until that student has graduated.

Once a disengaged student has been contacted, and even when that individual expresses enthusiasm about getting back on the path to graduation, there are almost always still significant obstacles that stand in the way of true re-engagement.

"We don't ever assume that a student is 'in the clear," Richards said. "Even among students who seem to be doing great, we're always working to help them stay engaged, and always watching for signs of trouble on the horizon."

1. TRUST BUILDING

The first step of reengagement is trust building. Fairly or unfairly — and often somewhere in between — disengaged students tend to see their decision to stop attending school to be the result of a breakdown of trust in their school and its leaders. For these individuals, it can be important to offer new authoritative paradigms, "rebranded" as needed, to set the tone for a "new start."[xii]

Depending on the structure of the programs being offered, this might include changes in terminology like "coaches" rather than "teachers," "advocates" rather than "counselors," and "managers" rather than "administrators." But this is all, of course, only window dressing in the trust-building process if the promises made to entice a student to return are not kept.

2. COMMUNICATION
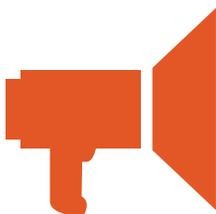
The second step is communication. Students in the first days and weeks of reengagement are extremely unlikely to express and explain all of the social, economic and health-related obstacles they are facing that might prevent success in school. As academic promises are kept, however, trust builds and opportunities for communication about these challenges will increase.

It's important to remember, of course, that teenagers, and especially those who have previously disengaged from school, tend to lead tumultuous lives, and the challenges that most threaten their continual academic progress will often shift.[xiii] With this in mind, periodic check-ins on their non-academic lives are important. Program facilitators don't have to pry, of course, but making sure the door for such conversations is not only open, but that students are actively invited in on a regular basis, is vital to ensuring that the life obstacles that are always conspiring to push students out of school don't come by surprise.

3. COORDINATION

The third step is coordination. The average student who has left school before graduation is 1.5 credits behind their peers by the end of their freshman year, 3.6 credits behind as a sophomore, 7.5 credits behind as a junior, and 12.5 credits behind as a senior (the school year with the highest number of dropout events.)[xiv] As most school districts across the country may not, by virtue of funding laws, continue educating students who are older than 21 (as of 2013, school districts in at least 32 states could not fund the educations of students past that age[xv]) many students who have been out of school for any length of time are racing against a proverbial clock to complete the requirements for their diplomas. This makes it vital to help students coordinate their efforts against their longer-term objectives.

A pace for course completion must be set and clear, and made with the understanding that many reengaged students will hit speedbumps and roadblocks along the way. This also necessitates conversations about and explorations of alternative successful exits, including continuing education through diploma programs intended for adults (which are becoming more common in states like Ohio[xvi],) GED test preparation, and workforce certifications and credentials.

4. REEVALUATION PROCESS

Finally, reengagement should always be seen as a process of trial, error, reevaluation, realism and regeneration. It is not common for students in recovery programs to hit the ground running and stay perfectly on pace. Every time a student stumbles — and stumble they will — should be seen as an opportunity to reevaluate their participation in the program in which they are engaged (not against the prospect of disenrollment but rather against other programmatic options); the educational options within the program in which they are engaged; and the social, emotional, economic, health-related and academic interventions being employed on the student's behalf. Such reevaluation may result in a decision to continue moving down the same path at the same speed, but it might also prompt a decision to move down a different path aimed at another successful exit outcome.

Indeed, for many students this process can actually put the "what gets measured gets done" conundrum in a different light. Freed from any pressures to help a student reach graduation with a four- or five-year cohort, once it's clear that such a goal is simply unfeasible, school leaders can fully consider what is most realistic and most in a student's benefit; this certainly might include continuing on the pathway to a diploma, but it might also include some of the other successful exit options.

Six Essential Attributes for Dropout Recovery

There is no single model for effective dropout recovery. Indeed, myriad strategies - from online learning programs augmented with multiple layers of social and academic support,[xvii] to brick-and-mortar academies focused on socio-behavioral interventions[xviii] - have proven successful. Key in the decision about the program or programs a district should offer are the number of students who need services, data reflecting the most common reasons for disengagement, the known challenges reengaged students are facing, and the capacity for administration and oversight.

No matter the model, however, there are six essential attributes that any successful dropout recovery program must have.

First, as previously discussed, a student recruitment and reengagement strategy is essential, for there can be no program without students. Recruitment should be facilitated through multiple communication channels, available to any eligible student at any time, and include a case management approach to "inbounding" the student.[xix]

Second, the program's academic strategies must be aligned with best practices, offering rigor and learning opportunities commensurate with traditional programs, including options for acceleration of credit accrual, providing high-quality teachers and support staff with specialized training in working with at-risk populations, and embracing meaningful assessment and feedback from highly qualified instructors.[xx] That latter quality is, unfortunately, missing from a large number of programs intended to help students recovery credit, much to the detriment not only to students' learning but also their ability to survive and thrive in their post-secondary lives.[xxi]

Third, programs should offer not only the academic preparation to advance a student's post-secondary goals, but also specific college and career training and assistance in how to take the "next steps" that are necessary to pursue those goals, including entrance exam preparation, application support, job search and résumé help, and assistance in pursuing credentials and certifications that are increasingly vital to career readiness.[xxii]

Fourth, every dropout recovery program should be focused not only on strengthening the student as an individual, but also fostering the support networks that are vital to helping keep students on track to reach their goals over long periods of time. These supporters includes parents and guardians, friends, religious leaders and community leaders. This also includes program staffing, which should offer multiple layers of interpersonal redundancy so that the loss of any one staff member does not interrupt a student's human connection to his or her school.[xxiii]

Fifth, coaching and mentoring - above and beyond the curricular obligations of teaching - should be abundant. Although success in individual courses is important, coaches and mentors foster sustained success across a variety of coursework, and nurture a student's ability to connect short-term curricular obligations with long-term life goals. On top of academic support, staffing decisions should be made with an eye toward providing social support by proactively looking for potential challenges in a student's life and offering assistance; for this reason, it is beneficial to have staff with experience not just in teaching but in social work as well.[xxiv]

Finally, there are a number of factors related to the administration of a program that are vital to success. This includes locational accessibility: Students cannot learn if they cannot get to their classes, either physically or virtually. It also includes decisions about staffing: Programs should include highly trained staff members who have a passion for working with at-risk students and who are receiving ongoing professional development for doing so. Programs must be consistently and easily monitored and evaluated, particularly if a third-party is facilitating any part of the reengagement and educational process. And finally, long-term funding must be stable - for, as any administrator knows, the budgeting process is often where the real decisions about student programming are made.[xxv]

Investing in Recovery

There is no question that dropout recovery initiatives are an important part of any comprehensive effort to raise graduation rates. But given the obstacles previously discussed, particularly the depth of credit deficiency among disengaged students in their late teens, recovery alone is not likely to offer a needle-moving miracle, and particularly not in districts that already have high graduation rates.

Why do it, then? The short answer is that it's the right thing to do for students. The longer answer is that it's the not only the right thing to do for students, but also for schools, districts, communities, states and the nation. Barring the sorts of health-related and behavioral challenges that can make educating any student with special needs more expensive, it does not and should not cost more per pupil to educate re-engaged students — and the long-term local, regional and national benefits of doing so make the decision to do so one of the best investments in the world.

Conservative estimates place the average lifetime difference in services used over taxes paid at $70,000 per individual without a diploma. By contrast, those with a high school diploma pay $230,000 on average more than they cost. The resulting difference in tax payments over public costs in helping just one individual earn a high school diploma is $300,000.[xxvi] Assuming this as a baseline figure and counting only working-age Americans, the nation's high school diploma gap represents a $7.4 trillion opportunity.

None of that, however, changes the fact that school leaders must pay for their students' education in the here and now. That's why investments in dropout recovery are best made when the per pupil funding that is retained and recovered by keeping students in school or bringing them back to school meets or exceeds the costs of providing those students' educations. The challenge this presents, especially to districts with relatively small numbers of disengaged students, is one of scaling. It's one thing to staff a program that can reliably be expected to have a large and steady number of students from year to year; it's another challenge altogether to try to "staff up" a program before knowing whether it will be serving three students or thirty. This is why many districts choose to work with a third-party educational services provider that can leverage an economy of scale and even in-person services provided to students from a number of districts across a region.

When working with third-party providers, as many districts will choose to do, a pay-for-success model is vital. While there is little way to know which students are most likely to succeed in any given dropout recovery structure, no district should invest in a program that is not helping students make meaningful and adequate progress toward their academic goals. To this end, if a student is not demonstrating adequate monthly progress, the funding attached to that student should be easily ceased and redirected to another program for which the student might be better suited.

Conclusion

When the school data analytics company Niche put together its 2017 list of the 100 best school districts in the United States, the winners were large and small districts in communities across the nation. The districts' demographics certainly skewed toward privileged, but weren't exclusively so. Some included relatively significant numbers of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches, a common metric for a quick assessment of the number of students in a district who come from families in economic stress. In some districts nearly all students were grade-level proficient in language and math, in others barely two-thirds were.[xxvii]

All of the districts had one thing in common, though: They all enjoyed graduation numbers we conventionally think of as "good" in comparison to the national average — generally rates in the mid- to high-90s. Not a single district in the group, however, could claim a perfect on-time graduation rate.

Individually the number of students in each district who fail to graduate on time — or at all — might seem small, ranging from a few children to a few dozen. Collectively, though, these and other districts that have the best graduation rates in the nation are losing tens of thousands of students each year.

Indeed, the dropout problem is real – and we all have a real obligation to do whatever we can to address it. Moreover, by adding recovery to prevention efforts, better understanding outreach and re-engagement, following best practices, and making smart investments, we all can do something.

In big districts and small districts, we can do more. In urban, suburban and rural districts, we can do more. In districts with high levels of poverty and those with exceptional levels of privilege, we can do more.

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