

Standards, Dropout Rates and Increasing High School Completion Rates

Policy Brief Prepared for the Wyoming State Board of Education

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THE THIRD MILE GROUP



Background

The Wyoming Department of Education, on behalf of the Wyoming State Board of Education, has contracted with the Third Mile Group to assist the Board in contemplating policy options and effective practices nationwide on decreasing the dropout rate and increasing high school completion rates.

Current Research Regarding Dropout and High School Completion Rates

Educators and local, state and federal policymakers throughout the country are currently fixated on high school completion rates and graduation rates – and with good reason. Current national estimates suggest that each year, one-third of public high school students fail to graduate from high school.¹ To put this in perspective, it is estimated that one high school student drops out of school every nine seconds. By the time you finish reading this policy brief, this nation’s high schools will have lost 100 students. This is cause for alarm in our country, for social, economic and civic reasons and, indeed, for moral reasons as well. As all educators know, high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, earn lower wages, be involved in criminal activity, have greater needs for public assistance, be single parents, and have children at a younger age. Approximately 75% of state prison inmates and 59% of federal inmates are dropouts. And the economic ramifications are just as stark: raising high school completion rates one percent for all men ages 20-60 would save the U.S. \$1.4 billion annually in crime-related costs.² This grim reality shows that this is not a problem just for those who drop out, but for all of us who live, work and raise families in our country.

According to the Wyoming Department of Education, the state’s average graduation rate in 2007 was approximately 79.5%, or 76.7% according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (for the 2004-2005 school year); the national average is 74.7%.³ A “dropout” in Wyoming is defined as someone who: (1) was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year, (2) was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year and (3) has not graduated from high school or completed a state or district approved educational program, and (4) does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: has transferred to another public school district, private school, or state or district approved education program; is temporarily absent due to suspension or school approved illness; has died.⁴

When disaggregated by gender (using figures from the 2003-2004 school year), males in Wyoming graduate at a slightly lower rate – 71.0% – than their female counterparts who

graduate at a slightly higher rate – 78.1%. A significant achievement gap exists among the graduation rates of Wyoming’s minority students: Native Americans graduate at a very, very low rate of 27.7%, Asians at 62%, Hispanics at 56%, and African Americans at 45.1%. Caucasians graduate at an average rate of 77.7% in Wyoming.⁵

Wyoming has made steady progress in improving the graduation rate. According to a September 2008 report by NCES, Wyoming’s graduation rate has climbed from 74.4 % in 2001-02 to 76.7% in 2004-05. However, the graduate rate varies greatly across the state of Wyoming and understanding these regional differences is important. For example, Fremont school districts 14, 38, and 21 all have a graduation rate of 60% or lower in the year 2007. It is important to note that various methods are utilized to obtain these rates and the data come from differing school years.

The data presented above are intended to give the reader a snapshot of graduation rates in Wyoming and how the state compares to the national average. Going beyond the percentage rates, however, let’s turn to understanding the variables that predict dropouts so we know ways to improve high school completion rates. Research indicates that the key factors for identifying students who are most likely to drop out are: poor grades in core subjects, low attendance, failure to be promoted to the next grade and disengagement in the classroom, including behavioral problems.⁶ All of these will be discussed in the following brief.

Factors Influencing the Dropout Rate

Education reform efforts across the country as well as compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act have contributed to a “Catch-22” situation for educators: students are more at risk of dropping out when they perform poorly in school, yet increased rigor in schools is a suggested strategy for decreasing the dropout rate. What’s an education system to do? Contrary to what some might think, evidence suggests that “requiring students to work harder and complete a tougher academic curriculum might actually improve graduation rates rather than making them plummet, as so many educators fear.”⁷

While the implementation of a high-quality standards-based school system is not necessarily the cause of more dropouts, increasing standards, coursework and rigor *without the proper supports* to students might increase the dropout rate. We can predict the likelihood of students dropping out based on several indicators, as illustrated in the table below:

Accuracy of Forecasting High School Dropouts Based on Freshman-Year Students Performance Indicators ⁸			
Freshman Performance Indicator	Overall Correct Prediction	Percentage of dropouts who can be identified (predicting non-graduates)	Percentage of graduates who can be identified (predicting graduates)
On-track vs. Off-track	80%	72%	85%
Absences for the year	77%	59%	90%
Fall semester absences	74%	53%	89%
GPA	80%	73%	85%
Semester course failures	80%	66%	89%
Fall semester failures	76%	55%	91%

For example, we can successfully identify 72% of dropouts based on whether they are “on track” regarding course taking and passing rates (on track means that at the end of 9th grade the student has accumulated enough course credits to earn promotion to 10th grade while receiving no more than one F). We can identify 59% of dropouts based on how many absences have occurred for the year. Of the six indicators presented here, the highest predictor of dropping out is whether the student is “on track” regarding his/her course completion and passing rates.

Factors embedded within the indicators of academic failure listed above, include student boredom, lack of challenging material for students and disengagement in academics due to lack of rigor.⁹ Thus, a key strategy for schools, districts and states is to increase rigor in the curriculum and coursework while at the same time increasing the instructional strategies that engage students and provide them with clear targets and expectations. In addition, extra support for students to help them reach their targets is a must.

Increased rigor and challenge for students is successfully implemented in high schools that are consistently rated as high performing. These schools cite several strategies as critical, the first being to ensure that curriculum and academic goals have relevance and rigor for students. Other strategies common to high-performing schools include:

- Focused professional development opportunities for educators that support a culture of collaboration
- Educators who embrace broader learning objectives than just their own subject matter and use differentiated strategies to reach students at all levels
- Teachers who interpret student achievement data to make decisions about teaching
- Recognition of student and teacher achievement within a context of support.¹⁰

It is important to note that raising academic standards can have a detrimental effect on the dropout rate *if* supports are not provided for failing students to re-engage and succeed. Higher academic standards are often part of a high-stakes accountability system but the system as a whole must be aligned toward the overall goal of increasing student achievement. And that means providing support and extra assistance to students who are at risk of dropping out as curricula and standards are revised. High-stakes testing does increase the dropout rate in some cases. One example is what has been called the “Texas Miracle” of the 1990s when educators and policymakers claimed improved student performance and higher test scores in the wake of changes to the statewide curriculum, minimum skills test and teacher proficiency tests. The reality was that more students were dropping out of Texas high schools, SAT test scores were stagnant, and more college freshmen were taking remedial courses because the supports necessary for students to deal with the increased rigor were not in place.¹¹

According to research, however, the number one reason students drop out is not a standards-based system or a system of high academic rigor, but rather that students are bored and feel classes have “no connection to real life”.¹² Other factors that affect the dropout rate are environments in which schools are too big and anonymous for students to have a positive relationship with an adult at the school; schools that do not track and intervene on excessive student absences; and lack of high expectations for all students from educators in the building.¹³

Craig Jerald, director of policy for the non-profit Strong American Schools, sums up the factors influencing dropouts very succinctly:

Students who earn failing grades and low test scores, who fall behind in course credits, and who are held back one or more times are much less likely to graduate. The same is true for students who exhibit high absenteeism, poor classroom behavior, and bad relationships with teachers and peers. Disengagement from school and poor academic performance often are closely related, with each reinforcing the other.¹⁴

Effective School and District Practices to Decrease Dropout Rates

Because studies point to some clear indicators that predict dropout behavior, schools and districts can address these factors with interventions that increase high school completion rates. The National Center for School Engagement has a simple and clear framework called the three A's: Attendance, Attachment and Achievement. The National High School Center promotes a similar strategy for schools to adopt: improving school climate (thus increasing attendance and attachment), investing in effective teachers and increasing academic rigor, and providing extended learning time for students (achievement).

One overarching theme in the quest to decrease dropouts is the *engagement* of students in school. This engagement theme is threaded throughout the discussions of improving school climate, ensuring that students have a positive relationship with adults in the school and the implementation of rigorous and relevant academics to challenge and interest students.

Specific research-based strategies for dropout prevention that fit within the framework of attendance, achievement and attachment are presented below.

Attachment of students to the school:

- Relevance of the curriculum to the real world
- Meaningful connections to adults
- Culture of caring and high expectations
- Attention to bullying prevention
- Smaller learning communities
- Service learning programs to interest and engage students

Attendance of students in school:

- Support systems for students who need extended learning time (more time, tutoring)
- Early warning data systems for truant and absent youth
- Home connections so that parents are aware of attendance issues and parents work with the school to prevent absenteeism
- Community partnerships with youth organizations and programs to support kids' mental, physical and emotional health – all aimed at keeping them in school

Achievement of students in school:

- Early reading focus in elementary school to ensure presence of the building blocks of academic success
- Reading across the curriculum – all teachers need to understand how to develop readers
- Relevance and rigor – schools can combine greater academic rigor with greater real-world relevance in their curricula
- English plus – students have higher academic achievement when they are allowed to use their native language as they learn English¹⁵
- Induction and professional development for educators in the building aligned to the specific learning needs of students.

Many school and district dropout prevention programs incorporate elements of these strategies. Eight specific programs that have substantial outcome data – and that warrant inclusion in the *What Works Clearinghouse* – are described below:¹⁶

- ***Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success*** provides student supports through counselors that work with students, their parents and teachers on an as-needed daily basis. Counselors provide direct instruction to parents on how to participate in their child’s schooling.
- ***Career Academies*** features small learning communities in larger schools that provide internships with businesses. The academies include technical course work as well as academic course work.
- ***Check and Connect*** provides trained counselors (called “monitors”) to small groups of students who track multiple data points on these students and meet with students, families and teachers on a regular basis about progress and needed support to students.
- ***Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program (VYP)*** provides intensive tutoring that focuses on academic achievement in addition to engaging students. The program includes student tutors.
- ***School Transitional Environmental Program (STEP)*** assigns at-risk students to homerooms where specially trained teachers provide extra guidance and support to students throughout each day.
- ***Response to Intervention***. Students are regularly assessed on a number of academic and social indicators to determine the need for academic or behavioral supports and then provided necessary supports as warranted.
- ***America’s Choice*** provides catch-up courses called Ramp Up to Algebra I and Ramp Up to Literacy.
- ***Talent Development/ Search*** provides 9th grade success academies (schools within schools where groups of 9th graders share classrooms and teachers) that includes block

scheduling for double doses of catch-up courses and specializes in high school prep classes to smooth the transition to high school.

Key State Policy Levers Relating to Dropout Prevention

States have a unique but important role for setting the context in which districts address the dropout crisis. States provide standards, accountability systems, requirements for educator professional development and resources to schools and districts in their dropout prevention efforts. Policy levers related to dropout prevention that states can employ include the following:

- Create data systems that help educators track the indicators that predict student dropouts. Link those databases to strategies and programs that have been proven to work.
- Provide universal early childhood education.
- Ensure an early reading focus in elementary standards and curriculum.
- Consider adolescent literacy needs in middle school curriculum and standards.
- Consider how to create meaningful smaller learning communities either in the development of new schools or the redesign of current ones.
- Ensure relevance and rigor in the curriculum of high schools and hold high schools accountable to this standard.
- Stop academic tracking and include high rigor and expectations for *all* students
- Coordinate state social and health services to support other aspects of low SES students.
- Ensure high-quality teacher and leader preparation at all levels of the system – including high school.
- Require high-quality induction and professional development for educators – teachers and leaders – at all levels of the system linked to student learning needs.

In addition, a recent *Education Week* article titled, *Raising Graduation Rates in an Era of High Standards*, suggests that states need to redress “the single-minded emphasis in current [accountability] systems on meeting high standards by giving weight to graduation as an equally critical goal.”¹⁷

The nonprofit organization Jobs for the Future (JFF), in partnership with Achieve, Inc., outlines the following strategies for states:

- Ensure that a high school diploma signifies college and work readiness by making sure that all students have equal access and opportunity to academically challenging high school programs of study. JFF emphasizes that states can do this without stifling innovation and flexibility in curriculum design at the local level.
- Make sure there is a clear pathway to graduation and college success for struggling and out-of-school students.
- Put a greater focus on turning around low-performing high schools. Jobs for the Future calls these “dropout factories” and suggests states work with districts to overhaul them and provide new supports and programs to turn them around or completely replace them with other options (see section on effective practices above).
- Increase the emphasis on graduation rates and college readiness in the next generation of accountability systems.

- Establish data and intervention systems to provide early and continuous support for struggling students.

Policy Actions Available and Appropriate for the Wyoming State Board of Education

There is no one silver bullet solution for states to reduce the dropout rate, but there is general consensus among researchers on a number of strategies that demonstrate strong evidence of working. The first step to implementing these strategies is to create data systems that track certain indicators that can help districts target interventions towards those students who are at risk of dropping out.

Early-warning data systems should be designed in conjunction with existing data and reporting systems and use accurate data to help assess problems in schools and apply appropriate interventions. A system should be able to track individual student-level data that can monitor students over time and allow risk factors to be assessed. According to *Key Lessons for Building Early Warning Data System: A Dual Agenda for High Standards and High Graduation Rates* by Craig Jerald (2006), the following should be included in the system:

- Risk factors by individual students
- Aggregate risk factors by school and type of school
- Rates in decline in academic achievement and engagement (as indicated by attendance and behavior)
- School level outcomes (on track by grade, off-track recovery rates and graduation rates)
- Systemwide analysis of student characteristics, risk factors, outcomes and impact of interventions.

One state example of such a system, mentioned earlier in this brief, is Check & Connect, a program developed in the late 1990s by a group of University of Minnesota researchers and local educators that has demonstrated promising results in several studies. Check & Connect relies on frequent, systematic monitoring of student warning signs such as absenteeism or disciplinary problems, and timely interventions to produce gains in attendance, educational engagement, and ultimately graduation.¹⁸

Once these early-warning data systems are in place it is important for schools, districts and states to use them appropriately. Tracking indicators does no good unless teachers and school leaders review and analyze the data and apply interventions based on what the data are telling them. For example, during the first part of the year, the system might track absences; during the second quarter, the system should monitor student behavior and engagement data sets. Then after the first set of grades come in, the data system should alert educators to students who need more time learning or extended support for getting back on track.

Other state initiatives, drawn directly from the Education Commission of the States' database, *State Initiatives to Improve High Schools*, include the following:

- ***State initiatives to improve the 9th-grade year:*** Eight states have developed recommendations or established policies or programs aimed to improve the transition

from middle to high school – the 9th grade. This transition period is one of the riskiest times for students, particularly those who already demonstrate some characteristics of being "at risk." There is a need for student support systems that target kids who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

- ***State initiatives to improve the senior year:*** Sixteen states have developed policies, programs or recommendations specifically designed to make the senior year more meaningful. These initiatives include efforts to require all students to complete a senior project; specially designed dual enrollment programs allowing students to begin attending college full-time or virtually full-time their senior year of high school; scholarship programs to encourage students to finish high school in fewer than four years; and other approaches. These initiatives can make a difference because meaningful senior year projects add the "real-world" relevance to the high school curriculum that so many students demand. And senior year projects help students think about next steps after high school – areas of interest for postsecondary study or potential careers.
- ***Outreach (state-funded initiatives to ensure students are well-prepared):*** At least 13 states have outreach policies or initiatives targeted at students and parents to ensure students are well prepared to complete high school and apply for postsecondary admissions and financial aid. Eight states require all students and/or their parents to receive notification on high school graduation requirements, their student's individual progress toward meeting graduation requirements, state-set college admissions requirements, or other such information. This is important because many students aspire to go to college, but need help navigating postsecondary options and completing college admissions and financial aid procedures.
- ***Initiatives that require students to create long-term plans*** (i.e., five-year plan, declaration of major, etc.): Twenty-three states and the District of Columbia require students to create some form of a long-term education plan, through an individual graduation plan, career major, or other activity. These initiatives are important steps because students need to complete a specific sequence of math and other courses before taking college placement exams in 10th or 11th grade. Establishing a default rigorous high school curriculum helps ensure students stay on track to complete the subject area content they need to perform well on such assessments.
- ***States that subsidize testing fees for the ACT, SAT, PLAN, PSAT, etc.:*** Twenty states offer all students the opportunity to take a college readiness assessment at no cost. These initiatives may make a difference because low-income families may opt out of taking college entrance exams based only on cost.
- ***States that require or authorize the use of e-transcripts:*** Five states appear to require the use of e-transcripts at the high school level. Eight states make e-transcripts available at the high school level, but do not require schools and districts to use them. Many state e-transcript programs are designed to allow students to submit their transcripts electronically when applying for college and/or financial aid. This simple strategy saves students, parents and schools the time and cost of transferring student records. In addition, e-transcripts facilitate access to student information as students navigate the

college and financial aid application process, and facilitate transfers across districts at the high school level.

Conclusion

Wyoming has clearly made progress in efforts to decrease the dropout rate. Indeed, the state has a relatively high graduation rate as compared to other states across the nation. However, much work remains to be done, especially in certain regions of the state where the dropout rate hovers close to 60%. Given the harsh realities of what happens to non-graduates in our country (relative to quality of life, health, economics and criminal activity), high dropout rates are unacceptable.

State departments of education, in close partnerships with school districts, can make a difference for students who are at risk of dropping out. The key is data systems that identify students at risk of dropping out early – and then providing support for those students as soon as possible.

Using the framework of attendance, attachment and achievement, states, districts, and schools can address the indicators for at-risk students by:

1. Increasing the attachment of students to the school through:

- Increasing the relevance of the curriculum to the real world
- Ensuring there are meaningful connections to adults for *all students*
- Creating a culture of caring and high expectations
- Ensuring attention to bullying prevention
- Creating smaller learning communities

2. Increasing and tracking attendance of students in school through:

- Early warning data systems for truant and absent youth
- Support systems for students who are identified as needing extended learning time (more time, tutoring)
- Home connections so that parents are aware of attendance issues and can work with the school to prevent absenteeism
- Community partnerships with youth organizations and programs to support kids' mental, physical and emotional health – all aimed at keeping them in school

3. Focusing on high achievement of students in school by:

- An early reading focus in elementary school to ensure the presence of the building blocks of academic success
- Reading across the curriculum – all teachers need to understand how to develop readers
- English plus – students have higher academic achievement when they are allowed to use their native language as they learn English¹⁹
- Induction and professional development for educators in the building aligned to the specific learning needs of students.

For additional ideas, policy specifics and supporting documentation, the web sites below provide a multitude of valuable resources for states.

Resources

ECS High School Policy Center

http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/educationissues/HighSchool/HighSchoolDB1_intro.asp

National High School Center

www.betterhighschools.org

Education Week: Diploma's Count

www.edweek.org/go/dc07

National Center on Student Engagement

<http://www.truancyprevention.org/>

Achieve, Inc.

<http://www.achieve.org/node/603>

Endnotes

¹ Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, J.J., & Morison, K.B. *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts* (Washington: Civic Enterprises, LLC, March 2006).

² U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Correctional Problems in the United States, 1998* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, NCJ-192929, 2002).

³ Laird, J., Kewalkamani, A., Chapman, C. *Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 2006*. Compendium Report. IES (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, (2008), and Wyoming Education Summary, Fall 2008 (Cheyenne: Wyoming Department of Education, 2008), retrieved 9-15-08 from <http://www.k12.wy.us/A/WES.asp>.

⁴ See, also, FAQ's for further specific definitions in *WDE607: WISE Dropout Statistics Data Collection Guidebook* (Cheyenne: Wyoming Department of Education, 2008), p. 7, retrieved from http://www.k12.wy.us/wise/document/2008/Fall2008_WDE607_Guidebook062508.pdf.

⁵ *Diplomas Count: Ready for What? Preparing Students for College, Careers and Life After High School*. *Education Week*, Vol. 26, Issue 40, June 12, 2007.

⁶ Kennelly, Louise and Maggie Monrad. *Approaches to Dropout Prevention: Heeding Early Warning Signs With Appropriate Interventions*. (Washington, DC: National High School Center, 2007).

⁷ Jerald, Craig D. *Dropping Out is Hard to Do*. (Washington, DC: Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement and Learning Point Associates, June 2006).

⁸ Table reproduced from the National High School Center, *Approaches to Dropout Prevention* research from Allensworth and Easton (2005).

⁹ National Center for School Engagement, National High School Center, The Education Commission of the States, *Education Week*, Learning Point Associates, Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement.

¹⁰ Dolejs, Chris, Jean Rutherford and Louise Kennelly (Ed.) *Report on Key Practices and Policies of Consistently Higher Performing High Schools*. (Washington, DC: National High School Center, 2006).

¹¹ Watson, Debra. "Education and the 2000 elections: Texas miracle debunked." World Socialist Web Site, International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), August 21, 2000.

¹² National Center for School Engagement.

¹³ Education Commission of the States. *The Progress of Education Reform: Dropout Prevention*. (Denver, CO: ECS, 2007).

¹⁴ Jerald.

¹⁵ Silverstein, Jennifer Sharp, Holly Yettick, Holly, Samara Foster, Kevin Welner, and Lorrie Shepard *Dropout Policies: Research-based Strategies*. (Boulder, CO: The School of Education, University of Colorado at Boulder and the Education and the Public Interest Center, 2007).

¹⁶ Dolejs.

¹⁷ Almeida, Cheryl and Adria Steinberg. "Raising Graduation Rates In an Era of High Standards." *Education Week*, July 30, 2008, Vol. 7, Issue 44.

¹⁸ Jerald, Craig D. *Key Lessons for Building An Early Warning Data System: A Dual Agenda for High Standards and High Graduation Rates*. (Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc., 2006).

¹⁹ Silverstein, et al.