

Combating the Dropout Epidemic

There has been a lot of press lately about an epidemic educators have been trying to address for years—the country’s alarming dropout rate. A quick search on Google turns up thousands of articles about high schools all over the country that have been labeled as dropout factories—schools in which no more than 60 percent of the students who start as freshmen make it to their senior year. According to Johns Hopkins University researchers Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters, in nearly 2,000 of the nation’s high schools, graduation is not the norm. A new study conducted by James Heckman and Paul LaFontaine, *The American High School Graduation Rate: Trends and Levels*, argues that the true high school graduation rate is substantially lower than the official rate issued by the National Center for Education Statistics and that it has been declining during the past 40 years.

Now that the system for reporting and counting dropouts is under revision, the extent of the problem is becoming clearer and of much greater concern to policymakers and educators, economists and politicians, and in particular to communities that experience the greatest immediate losses. “While students decide to drop out of high school for all sorts of reasons, boredom with coursework and a lack of personal connection to adults in the school are some of the most common cited by dropouts,” says Francie Lindner, a director in NWREL’s Recreating Secondary Schools (RSS) program.

During the past several years, the RSS program has assisted leaders of more than 1,200 high schools nationwide with design and implementation plans for restructuring with the goal of providing all students with access to

rigorous and relevant curriculum and instruction, and strong systems of academic and personal support. Research indicates that strategies used to achieve this goal can also help keep students in school, as well as help prepare them for an active civic life and success in work or postsecondary education.

These shared strategies prompted RSS to supplement its professional development and support program known as the Core & More, with workshops and on-site coaching focusing on comprehensive dropout prevention. The three pillars that support the Core & More’s framework—instructional program coherence, small learning community (SLC) design and implementation, and district support for school improvement—complement the dropout prevention domains of:

MOBILIZING PARENT & COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Core & More trainers help schools and districts develop a systemic response to dropout prevention, tapping into the extensive resources and assets of families and the community. Trainings focus on alignment and involvement of organizations to support student success; parent outreach in supporting their children’s educational goals; building strong advisement and other support systems; and developing youth mentoring programs. Core & More staff share systems to develop a network of caring adults to support all students.

SUCCESSFUL POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION

Trainings emphasize the development of graduation plans; building 21st century skills; integrating career development approaches, and rigorous and relevant interdisciplinary curriculum approaches; and providing

the mentoring and counseling services needed to guide students on a successful career and/or higher education path. This training also covers strategies for dual enrollment options.

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Core & More trainers use an asset-based approach to develop and incorporate student voice into school or district plans. Through Listening to Student Voices, an empowerment process developed by NWREL staff in collaboration with other Regional Educational Laboratories, students learn to assess the delivery models for their educational experience and provide input into the change process.

The RSS program can tailor a combination of workshops and support that meets a school or district’s particular needs. The program’s intention is to build capacity by preparing district- and/or school-based leadership teams to lead trainings for the rest of the staff. Giving school and district staffs the tools and resources to create sustainable professional development helps ensure that improvements will continue after NWREL staff complete their work with the school or district.

For more information, go to www.nwrel.org/csdi/rss/coremore/services.php or call Francie Lindner at 800-547-6339, ext. 602. ■