Fact Sheet: Early Intervention to Reduce Dropping Out

Early intervention often is thought to be investing in children under the age of five, through programs like Head Start and the Women, Infants, and Children nutrition program. A broader meaning is that early intervention is about intervening to reduce problems before they occur. Dropping out of high school is a major economic and social problem, and intervening early to reduce it will yield benefits to the economy and to society. Approaches for reducing it have been studied and a synthesis of lessons from these approaches shows that dropping out can be reduced.

The high school graduation rate recently has improved but dropping out continues to be a serious problem. Even with recent improvements, twenty percent of young people do not complete high school. They face futures likely to be plagued by years or decades of dysfunction: higher rates of drug use and teen pregnancy, high rates of criminal involvement and incarceration, low rates of employment and success in the labor market, and greater dependence on welfare. Their lack of success in education creates costs to the economy and society. It has been estimated that a dropout earns $300,000 less over the course of their working years (link). Cutting high school dropout rates in half would increase government revenues annually by $45 billion (through added tax revenues, reduced costs of public health, crime and justice, and reduced welfare payments), with two-thirds going to the federal government (link).

Federal government efforts to reduce dropping out have been sporadic. Section 1802 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind) authorized appropriations of $125 million for reducing dropping out, but actual appropriations were under $5 million a year through 2006, *zero* in 2007-2009, and around $46 million a year since 2010. With nearly half a million youth dropping out a year, the Federal government currently is spending about $90 a year for each dropout.

The small Federal investment is not offset by large state investments. They are small too. Texas, California, and Florida account for a large proportion of dropouts. Texas funding (under HB 2237) was about $400 per Texas dropout during the four-year funding cycle of the bill. California's 'Pupil Retention' program is an annual block grant to counties, spending $77 million in the 2013 fiscal year. As a block grant, it is difficult to know how much is spent on dropouts or students at risk of dropping out. It's about $1,200 per dropout if it were highly targeted and about $150 a student if not targeted. Florida funds dropout prevention activities within general appropriations. How much it spends to reduce dropping out is not tabulated.

Though Federal and state funding to reduce dropping out is minimal, pilot programs and demonstrations, often funded by philanthropy, have enabled researchers to study the effectiveness of program approaches, policies, and models. (No national evaluations of Federal programs have been done since the nineties.) In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences convened a panel of researchers and practitioners to synthesize research and, based on the synthesis, recommend practices states and local school districts can implement to reduce dropping out. The six practices recommended by the panel in its practice guide were:

1) Implement early warning systems enabling districts to count and identify students at risk of dropping out

2) Assign adult mentors to at-risk students to ensure their educational progress
3) Provide support and enrichment to improve academic performance
4) Implement programs to improve classroom behavior and social skills
5) Personalize the learning environment and instructional process
6) Ensure instruction engages students in learning provides them with skills to serve them after high school

Each practice is solidly grounded in evidence, which is reviewed in the practice guide. There is more to learn but the lack of funded programs and evaluations has hampered efforts to innovate and to identify new approaches.

Research since the release of the practice guide offers more support for its recommendations. The first—count and identify students at risk—has begun to be implemented in various states and school districts as 'early warning systems,' leveraging the substantial Federal investment already made in developing state longitudinal data systems. A recent synthesis by Child Trends on Integrated Student Support models, shows the positive impact of adults forming relationships with at-risk students focused on helping them succeed in school and overcome out of school barriers (recommendation 2). The School Discipline Consensus report by the Justice Center has synthesized the research demonstrating the link between school suspensions and dropping out, as well emerging alternatives that focus on teaching good behaviors (recommendation 4). Research reports by the Chicago Consortium of School Research have shown how schools can organize the 9th grade experience to keep more students on track to graduation and raise academic outcomes (recommendations 3-5) And a study of small high schools in New York City, schools that personalize education (recommendation 5), provided rigorous evidence that smaller schools improved academic outcomes and had higher high-school graduation rates *and* higher college enrollment rates. The sixth recommendation is consistent with the current administration's focus on 'college and career readiness.'

More information, resources, and technical assistance guides about dropout prevention programs can be found at the National Dropout Prevention Network, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the 'Everyone Graduates' research center at the Johns Hopkins University.

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