Research Brief

Addressing Enrollment Decline in High Schools

Question: What strategies are most important when developing a plan to address enrollment decline?

Summary of Findings:
Dealing with enrollment decline is an issue of both retaining the students you have and encouraging others, who may choose other schools, to attend your school. Both growth and retention are impacted by many factors. The current economic malaise has contributed to increased mobility for families, a perennial problem in many urban districts. The research shows that retaining students is really an issue of how to make your school a safe, respectful, academically successful environment. Attracting additional students is shaped by the same factors.

A 2007 study of urban high school parents conducted by the National School Boards Association's Council of Urban School Boards identified the factors that impact school climate and, therefore, parent support for school. They include:

Safety – Parents want their children attending schools that are safe, where their child will be free from bullying and know that such behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. The presence of weapons, or threats of weapons, undermines parent confidence in their child's school. Parents most often rely on their child or the local news media to learn about the safety of their child's school and schools must become much more proactive in marketing the benefits of their program.

Parental Involvement – Most parents, regardless of ethnicity or poverty status, want to be involved in their child's school. They want to feel welcomed, valued, and connected to what their child is learning and doing in class. The study found that African-American and Hispanic parents feel less welcomed and valued by school personnel.

Trust, Respect and an Ethos of Caring – Parents want their child's school to be characterized by a warm, friendly, caring atmosphere. They want to know that their child is known by teachers and other adults, that their child's progress is monitored, and that there is sufficient support to assure that their child will be successful.

Factors Impacting High School Completion
The Southern Regional Education Board (www.sreb.org) identified several strategies for improving achievement and improving high school completion rates. They include:
1. Initiate a transition program for middle grades to high school
2. Develop an extra-help system to assist students to recover when they fail a grade or a course
3. Require every student to develop a five-year program of study that includes high school and one year beyond
4. Provide students access to quality career/technical study in high-demand, high-paying careers
5. Train all teachers---academic, fine arts, technical---in how to use content-literacy skills and study skills to help students become independent learners
6. Develop a formalized plan for the transition from high school to college and careers
7. Expand the use of technology to improve achievement on core academic courses and to help students recover when they fail a course and to meet standards on exit exams.

Reducing Dropouts
The decision to drop out of school is an individual one shaped by one's individual circumstances and needs. That means that there must be an array of programs to respond to student and family needs. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory identified several elements of successful dropout prevention programs.
• A climate characterized by safety and orderliness

- A variety of strategies that can be packaged in various combinations to support student success
- A curricular option that mixes academic instruction with experiential learning with a focus on reading and writing skills, self-esteem building, social skills, and parenting skills
- Programs staffed by caring adults who show interest and concern, who understand, but don't make excuses, for the student.
- A climate of collegiality among staff that extends to creating a sense of belonging for students and their families.

There is little evidence that just raising academic standards will reduce dropouts. But, there is no evidence that lowering standards or expectations reduces dropouts either because it communicates a lack of confidence in students. The key factor appears to be the level of support provided students, increased opportunity for success, and a positive, safe, and non-threatening environment.

A report prepared for the California legislature, *Improving High Schools: A Strategic Approach*, identified five research-based "best practices" for addressing high school dropouts. Each of the elements has been shown to successfully reduce dropout rates.

An Academic Push – A focus on teaching and learning and doing "whatever it takes" to increase the academic skills of students.

Early Attention to Low Performance – Special programs in middle school for "at-risk" students who appear on track to dropout.

More Personalized Schools – More personal, supportive schools to help create an environment that encourages lower-performing students to engage in school.

A Greater Range of Options – Giving students and families greater control over their program and align school with student goals.

Parental Involvement – Involving parents as partners.

Programs to Attract and Retain Students
The transition from eighth to ninth grade can be difficult for students and their families. The single most predictive indicator of becoming a dropout is the student's academic standing in the ninth grade.

Transition Programs: Many high schools have created targeted ninth grade transition programs in collaboration with their feeder schools. Effective high school transition programs are characterized by:
- Clear, useful information for parents and students
- Opportunity for peer interaction and development of a support system
- Opportunity for parent involvement in school activities
- Regular, ongoing communication between middle and high school teachers
- Planned academic support and monitoring of all incoming 9th graders

Ninth Grade Academies: Because of the pivotal nature of the 9th grade, many schools have begun to organize 9th Grade Academies that provide targeted support to ninth graders by providing additional academic support and assigning teachers with a specific interest and training in working with ninth graders. These academies are not remedial in nature but often provide a more protected and supportive transition for students and their families. See the Research Brief on "9th Grade Academies" (http://www.principalspartnership.com/NinthAcademies.pdf) for additional information. One model with proven results is the Talent Development Model from John Hopkins University.

Marketing High Schools to Families
In addition to reducing dropouts it is important to provide families in your community with information about your school and its programs. You do not want to rely solely on the local media to "tell your story." In order to have effective communication with families and community, they must be regularly well informed about the school and their child's progress. It is important to use a variety of communication strategies in easily understood language as well as the primary languages of the community. This has been shown to increase trust and confidence in the school.

High School Reform Models Impacting Retention and Enrollment
There are several reform models that have been successful in dealing with problems of retention and enrollment growth. They include *Breaking Ranks* from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (www.principals.org) and *High Schools That Work* from the Southern Regional Education Board (www.sreb.org).

Breaking Ranks provides a model for systemic changes to high schools that address the fundamental issues of retention---safety, school climate, and family involvement. It includes seven cornerstone strategies and a brief introduction can be found at http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc/institutes_2005/documents/Ollarvia_executive_summary.pdf. *Breaking Ranks: A Field Guide for Leading Change*, available from NASSP, provides explicit tools for principals to use when working with their faculty to improve their schools.

High Schools That Work **(HSTW)** is one of the most successful school reform models in the nation. The central purpose of HSTW is to engage students so fully in their learning that they stay in school and complete a rigorous, relevant curriculum that prepares them for a successful transition to post-secondary studies and/or the world of work. It is currently being implemented in over 1200 high schools. At least two studies (Kaufman, Bradby, Teitelbaum, 2000; Young & Cline, 2008) provide empirical evidence that when implemented, the key *High Schools that Work* practices make a difference, and have greater efficacy than others in terms of raising student achievement in reading, math, and science. Even in urban high schools, where student achievement results lagged behind non-urban schools, students who had completed the HSTW recommended curriculum scored than students who had not (Bottoms, Han, Presson, 2006).

Additional Research Briefs
Additional information regarding programs and practices that impact recruitment and retention of students is included in the following Research Briefs available from www.principalspartnership.com.

Attendance:
Dropout Rate - http://www.principalspartnership.com/dropoutrate.pdf

Student Attendance – http://www.principalspartnership.com/attendance2.pdf

Getting Students to Graduation and Beyond - http://www.principalspartnership.com/keepingstinschool.pdf

Keeping Students on Track for Graduation - http://www.principalspartnership.com/graduation.pdf

Programs and Practices:
After-School Programs for 9th grade Students - http://www.principalspartnership.com/AfterSchoolPrograms.pdf

Eighth to Ninth Grade Transition - http://www.principalspartnership.com/8thto9thMay08.pdf

High School Student Mentoring Programs - http://www.principalspartnership.com/mentoring.pdf

High Schools that Work - http://www.principalspartnership.com/HighSchoolsThatWork.pdf

Research Brief

Marketing Urban High Schools - http://www.principalspartnership.com/marketingurbanHS.pdf

Mentoring for Low-Performing Students - http://www.principalspartnership.com/MentoringLow.pdf

Ninth Grade Academies - http://www.principalspartnership.com/NinthAcademies.pdf

Welcoming New Students - http://www.principalspartnership.com/welcomingnewstudents.pdf

Online Resources:

Reducing the Dropout Rate by E. Gregory Woods of the Northwest Regional Educational Lab.
http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/9/c017.html

Becoming a High Schools That Work State or Site. (n.d.) Retrieved from:
http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/becoming/becomingindex.asp

Urban Students Achieve when High Schools Implement Proven Practices. By G. Bottoms, L. Han, & A. Presson. (2006). Retrieved from:
http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/2006Pubs/UrbanResearchBrief.asp

Survey of Urban Parents About School Climate – This study was conducted by the National School Boards Association's Council of Urban School Boards and reports parent perceptions of urban school climate.
http://www.nsba.org/SecondaryMenu/CUBE/Publications/CUBEResearchReports/WhatWeThink.aspx

Improving High School: A Strategic Approach – This report for the California Department of Education discusses strategies to improve high schools including ways to reduce dropouts.
www.lao.ca.gov/laoapp/PubDetails.aspx?id=1322

Submitted Date: Nov 15, 2009   By: Ronald Williamson, Eastern Michigan University   http://www.principalspartnership.com/