

Dropout Recovery

STRATEGY BRIEF

○ Background Information

The deleterious outcomes that follow dropping out of school are well known. Dropouts are likely to experience problems such as poverty, incarceration, health issues, unemployment, and economic hardship (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). To end these problems, schools have typically focused on dropout prevention instead of “recovering” and re-enrolling students who have already dropped out of school. For instance, in Hoyle and Collier’s (2006) study of ten school districts, only two reported using dropout recovery efforts.

Individuals who drop out of school do so for a myriad of reasons, including behavioral difficulties, academic failures, poor relationships with teachers, pregnancy, and family or job obligations (Legters & Balfanz, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Wilkins, 2011a). Dropouts usually end up falling so far behind that they find it impossible to catch up. Given the fact that traditional high schools are not set up in a way that is appropriate for all students and the tendency for the most dropout efforts to be focused on prevention, it is essential that dropout recovery practices be implemented to recover the individuals for whom these prevention efforts were inadequate.

○ What Is Dropout Recovery?

Although there are variations of the term ‘dropout recovery,’ these programs are similar in that they generally attempt to find dropouts and re-enroll them in school with the hopes of earning a high school diploma (Wilkins, 2011a). Dropout recovery programs “...recruit students back into an educational setting or support the attainment of a diploma or GED” (Shannon & Bylsma, 2003, p. 59). Alternative names for these programs include school ‘reentry’ programs or ‘second chance’ programs. Second chance programs allow students to choose alternative forms of education, so the responsibility and ownership of their education shifts from the school personnel to the students themselves (Lange & Lehr, 2000). Dropout recovery can also be conceptualized as efforts or procedures focusing on reaching out to dropouts and offer them skills and services that meet their needs (Steinberg & Almeida, 2004). In other words, more of a focus is centered on skills that prepare individuals who drop out for employment.

○ Specific Dropout Recovery Strategies

The following are three strategies for schools that are pursuing dropout recovery initiatives:

1. Programs that focus on reconnecting dropouts with school systems with the goal of earning a high school diploma through
 - a. Re-enrolling or re-entry in the regular high school with or without modifications

- b. Enrolling in Alternative Schools
2. Programs which result in GED Certification
3. Programs providing employment and life skills without graduation or a diploma.

Initial dropout recovery strategies for reenrollment in particular should focus on actively contacting these youth via phone calls, home visits, pamphlets, and media outlets. Reenrollment should be made easy with reengagement centers, drop-in days, and school orientations (Wilkins, 2011b). Also, it is helpful for schools to connect with community agencies and other school districts to have them assist in the location of school dropouts.

Dropout recovery efforts are comprised of “multiple pathways” initiatives, which acknowledge that the pursuit of post-secondary education is not appropriate or realistic for all students (Bloom, 2010). Specific programs or practices that can be implemented to improve the recovery of dropouts consist of flexible, individualized, and interactive approaches to learning (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). For instance, small learning communities and flexible scheduling (e.g., evening school) are two accommodations that can be made for out-of-school youth. Some programs involve flexible criteria and requirements such as portfolio projects and self-paced learning (Wilkins, 2011a). Given that individuals who dropout tend to experience difficulties in life that are interfering with school, comprehensive dropout recovery programs should address psychosocial issues as well, such as parenting, nutrition, mental health, and transportation challenges (Martin & Halperin, 2006). Finally, community service and service learning are emphasized to promote the responsibility and engagement of youth who drop out.

○ Components Involved In Dropout Recovery

Despite the variety of recovery options for dropouts, common themes are apparent within successful dropout recovery programs. Promoting student engagement within these programs is crucial since engagement is tied to school success and completion (Stout & Christenson, 2009). Dropout recovery programs also need to be flexible enough to meet the needs of the at-risk students they are serving and should assess baseline academic skills in order to adapt the curriculum to their instructional level. Dropout recovery experts need to seek a balance between making up for academic skills deficits and accelerating through the program at an acceptable rate. The following are specific components included in successful dropout recovery programs:

○ **Meaningful curricula**

Dropout recovery programs should be meaningful in the sense that students can apply what they learned to a future career, or exchange prior employment experiences for credit. In other words, students should find the learning material relevant. Martin and Halperin (2006) assert that dropout recovery programs should incorporate employment opportunities along with academics, and offer a variety of support services to achieve this goal.

○ **Hassle-free enrollment**

It is crucial to make reenrollment an easy process for dropouts. Steinberg and Almeida (2004) state that one of the initial efforts of dropout recovery programs should be to establish direct contact and communication with dropouts. Therefore, explicit attempts

first need to be made to identify and locate students who have dropped out of school. Specific factors that facilitate this process include an open entry/exit policy, opening enrollment centers, and/or extending school hours so dropouts can re-enroll right away (Martin & Halperin, 2006). Once students are re-enrolled, the emphasis of dropout recovery programs can then shift to flexible scheduling and learning that takes place year-round.

○ **Supportive and Engaging Climate**

Dropout recovery programs should also establish interactive climates that are led by devoted, supportive teachers. This is not to say that these programs should lack structure, since consistently implemented codes of conduct are related to successful recovery efforts (Martin & Halperin, 2006). Furthermore, recovery programs need to be characterized by a school climate that encourages self-governance and motivates students to take risks (Rumberger, 2001). With regard to teacher variables, low student-teacher ratios are ideal in order to encourage engagement and high interaction. It is beneficial for teachers to adopt the role of leaders and coaches, and be part of a caring and supportive staff who have committed themselves to the success of their students (Martin & Halperin, 2006; Rumberger, 2001). Overall, fostering a non-threatening learning environment by ensuring that the aforementioned variables are present is conducive to successful dropout recovery efforts.

○ **Reentry Programs**

High school reentry programs and practices focus on helping students return to school to earn a high school diploma. These programs incorporate accelerated learning and self-paced learning options and are typically held in credit recovery centers or in computer labs. A major challenge these programs face is to locate dropouts and re-enroll them.

○ **Computer-Based Instruction**

Cyber schools are common alternative schools due to their flexibility and the appeal of using computers while learning (Shannon & Bylsma, 2003). Teachers are usually available to answer questions and guide students through the lessons as they navigate them. These may be arms of the regular high school, or may represent an alternative school within the school district.

○ **Credit Recovery**

Credit recovery programs allow students to make up or “recover” the credits they have lost according to issues associated with dropping out, such as absenteeism and failed classes (Dessoiff, 2009). These programs are usually community-based and are supported by sanctioned diploma-granting organizations, such as local school districts (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Some credit recovery programs are carried out online, such as the Apex Learning curriculum. Ideally, online credit recovery programs involve students working in a computer lab with adults available for support. This arrangement enables students to progress at their own pace. Other options use blended approaches that mix face-to-face instruction and online lessons.

Examples:

Educational Options, Inc.

Educational Options, Inc. is made up of a school curriculum that is delivered via the internet. Specifically, the NOVEL/STARS curriculum is used, which consists of 31 high school and middle school courses. This program incorporates assessment and flexibility in order to allow students to individualize the program content to meet their needs and requirements.

High School Completion Program (HSCP) in Vermont

The HSCP was implemented in response to the passage of Act 176 in Vermont (Vallett, 2011). The HSCP is intended for dropouts who are between 16 and 21 years old and have at least two years of credits. It is competency-based in that students may demonstrate skills and competencies (e.g., through portfolios) and “bid for credit”, with the goal of them being approved by the participating high school. Each student is assigned to a district of residence and this school collaborates with the student and the Adult Education and Literacy contractor to develop an individualized graduation plan. For 16 and 17 year-olds, additional work-related or further education requirements must be met as well (e.g., career exploration, preparation for post-secondary training). Counseling services may be provided and connections with community are emphasized.

<p><i>Barriers to Reentry Programs (NGA Center for Best Practices, 2011):</i></p>	<p><i>Advantages of Reentry Programs:</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Challenges associated with identifying who has dropped out and where they are living - Time constraints and the need for extra personnel to locate and convince students to come back to school - Difficulties accommodating dropouts in traditional high schools (e.g., limited space) - Lack of quality non-traditional programs - Reliance on technology, which may be unreliable and fraught with malfunctions - Lack of consistent attendance - Limited funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An effective option when a system of dropout data collection and course information are established (i.e., students and schools can know what requirements still need to be met for graduate and set the stage for a seamless return to school) - Avoidance of age restriction barriers - The appeal of technology for students who have not fared well in a traditional high school - Low per-student cost (Wilkins, 2011a) - Flexibility in that students can move at their own pace

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools can come in a variety of forms and represent an educational environment that falls outside of the realm of traditional education. Alternative schools are convenient in that they offer scheduling accommodations (e.g., night classes, Saturday school) and enable students to progress at their own pace (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Other characteristics include small student populations, low teacher-to-student ratios, supportive and committed staff, and individualized learning goals (Shannon & Bylsma, 2003). Some alternative schools focus on a specific set of skills. Examples include small learning communities, magnet schools, accelerated programs, and middle college schools (ACTE, 2007).

○ National External Diploma Program

This option involves students earning credits for real-life experiences, such as previously held jobs. According to Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), individuals who pursue this option are required to “prove” their skills to an assessor, who then awards a diploma if these skills are deemed adequate. However, the National External Diploma Program is not a widely available or popular option for dropouts.

○ Magnet and Charter Schools

Magnet and charter schools are often appropriate options for dropouts due to their flexibility and the fact that they do not necessarily have to meet state requirements like traditional public schools (Shannon & Bylsma, 2003). They commonly focus on specific skills and are led by specialized teachers. Thus, they are often called “schools of choice.” Some charter schools also provide instruction that address psychosocial issues and provide other forms of support, such as parenting courses or substance abuse treatment.

An example: ISUS Charter Schools in Montgomery County

According to Martin & Halperin (2006), these schools have been made available in Dayton, OH under the philosophy that students can earn a high school diploma alongside a certification in an industry of their choosing. Students may choose to pursue one of four programs: 1) construction technology, 2) health care, 3) manufacturing, or computer technology. So, while they earn their high school diploma they are simultaneously able to receive hands on, “on the job” training. Students attend longer school days for approximately 210 days of the year, and the curriculum is competency based. Time is divided equally among technical training, on site fieldwork, and academic subjects.

○ Middle Colleges

Middle Colleges result from partnerships between community colleges and high school diploma programs. They usually allow open enrollment and permit students to finish high school while simultaneously accumulating college credit (i.e., dual credits). Also, they are held on community college campuses in order to bring dropouts closer to

college students, who serve as peer role models (Shannon & Bylsma, 2003). Remedial classes are offered that help students catch up and gain basic skills if entrance exam places indicate their need to do so (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Shannon and Bylsma (2003) argue that these programs may be appropriate for more motivated individuals who have dropped out.

Gateway to College

This program is for individuals between the ages of 16 and 21. These individuals work to earn their high school diploma while also acquiring credits for an associate’s degree or certificate. Collaboration is key within this program to ensure the students’ high school courses and testing requirements are adequate prerequisites for the college courses (Wilkins, 2011a).

Seattle Community Colleges

This program is intended for 16 to 20 year-old individuals who have dropped out or who are on the verge for doing so. It is unique in that prospective students are screened prior to being admitted; an interview takes place to ensure they are motivated to complete the program. Individuals take classes at the local community colleges and receive a diploma from Seattle Public Schools when they are done.

<i>Barriers to Alternative Schools:</i>	<i>Advantages of Alternative Schools:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community support and collaboration between agencies (e.g., community colleges and high schools) is necessary for success - Family or outside obligations/responsibilities may prevent students from attending alternative schools - Few opportunities to gain credits for real life experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased proximity to college students may enhance students’ motivation - Dual credit options allow students to earn a high school diploma while accumulating college credit as well (Wilkins, 2011a)

○ General Educational Development (GED) Certification

GED programs generally seek to help students identify their career and academic goals as well as help them earn the GED (Helping students finish school). The GED is a popular option and may be suitable for students who leave traditional high schools (Shannon & Bylsma, 2003). However, there is mixed evidence in the literature and many have opposed GED attainment.

Some even classify individuals who obtain a GED as dropouts. GED certification programs are pursued through Adult Education Programs or community colleges (Steinberg & Almeida, 2004). Those who earn a GED typically have a harder time obtaining employment and experience more disadvantages (e.g., lower incomes) than those who earn a regular high school diploma (Bloom, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Nonetheless, there is a general consensus that getting a GED is preferable when compared to earning no educational certificate or diploma whatsoever.

The NGA Center for Best Practices (2011) offers the following advantages and disadvantages of obtaining a GED certification:

<i>Barriers to the GED:</i>	<i>Advantages of the GED:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not as highly regarded or beneficial as the high school diploma - Accountability issues with No Child Left Behind (Wilkins, 2011a) - GED students do not count as graduates in calculating dropout rate (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Helps when students have aged out - Appropriate when skill deficits are present - Better than no high school credential at all - Paves the way for post-secondary education

New York City Public Schools GED Program

New York City public schools offer the GED program that can be pursued in either a full-time or a part-time option (Smith & Burrow, 2008). Students progress through this program alongside a Learning to Work Program that links individuals to post-secondary education or employment opportunities. Their Access GED program is the full-time approach that is geared toward over-age, under-credited youth. It utilizes a myriad of strategies such as developmental portfolios, engagement systems, assessments, and considers the transition post-GED to employment options and career exploration. The part-time component prides itself on using research-based instructional materials and high quality instructional strategies.

○ GED Option Programs

According to Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), twelve states have enacted programs that allow students to earn their GED while they are still in school. Students are eligible if they are behind on credits or are on the verge of dropping out. The philosophy behind GED Option Programs is that individuals will at the minimum remain involved in school even though they will not ultimately obtain a high school diploma. In other words, they can

stay enrolled in high school as long as they are working on their GED. Thus, this approach relies on a unique mix of prevention and recovery.

○ Employment Preparation Programs

Employment preparation programs were created for the subset of students who are not necessarily planning on pursuing secondary education. The most effective employment preparation programs, however, are comprehensive in the sense that they usually offer diploma or certificate options as well. Some employment programs are residential, and many have established partnerships with community organizations that help students acquire work experience and obtain jobs upon completing the program. The following three examples are national programs that prepare dropouts for work in the community.

Job Corps

Job Corps is a program funded by the United States Department of Labor for youth 16 years and older. It is comprehensive in the sense that it emphasizes employment and job skills, academics, community service, social skills and competences, and academics (Martin & Halperin, 2006). This program enables dropouts to pursue an area of expertise and employment while earning a GED or high school diploma (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2012). Job Corps is a residential program, has an open entry/exit policy, and focuses on building connections with possible places of employment for the out of school youth who attend (Martin & Halperin, 2006). Job Corps is evidence-based. It has the most rigorous experimentation and support for effectiveness out of the currently available employment programs (Steinberg & Almeida, 2004).

- Website: <http://www.jobcorps.gov/home.aspx>
- http://www.dropoutprevention.org/modelprograms/show_program.php?pid=146

National Guard Youth Challenge

The National Guard Youth Challenge program is for unemployed dropouts between the ages of 16 and 18 years old who are not involved in the court system (Martin & Halperin, 2006). Its focus is on eight core areas (leadership/fellowship, responsible citizenship, service to the community, life-coping skills, physical fitness, health and hygiene, job skills, and academic excellence). Attendants progress through the military-like program in three phases. Specifically, they go through a two-week pre-challenge phase, followed by longer residential and follow-up phases. During the follow-up phase, graduates of the program choose a mentor, who then undergoes training to ensure that the success and goals are maintained over time.

- Website: <http://www.ngycp.org/site/>
- http://www.dropoutprevention.org/modelprograms/show_program.php?pid=130

YouthBuild

YouthBuild is another example of a comprehensive program that balances education (i.e., a GED or high school diploma) and job skills, specifically in the area of construction. YouthBuild targets low-income youth who are between ages 16 and 24 years old (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010). A major focus of this program is life skills and preparing students for the “real world.” Instruction is individualized and participants complete their work on computers. The average duration of the program falls approximately between six months to approximately two years.

○ Website:

<http://www.youthbuild.org/site/c.htlRI3PIKoG/b.1223921/k.BD3C/Home.htm>

○ http://www.dropoutprevention.org/modelprograms/show_program.php?pid=223

<i>Barriers to Employment Programs:</i>	<i>Advantages of Employment Programs:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The labor market is moving toward postsecondary education being the minimum requirement for employment, so “readiness to succeed in college courses must be the standard for recovery programs” (Steinberg & Almeida, 2004)- In some cases, these programs are specifically designed for, and available to, certain subsets of youth (e.g., youth in the juvenile justice system)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Work experience while earning a diploma (Steinberg & Almeida, 2004)- On-site experience and facilitates the job search process (Steinberg & Almeida, 2004)- Emphasis on leadership and service learning (Bloom, 2010)

○ Reentry Considerations for Special Needs Students

A unique subset of dropout recovery programs is committed to reintegrating students who have dropped out due to special needs or disabilities. Unfortunately, after high school, much of the responsibility falls on this population of students to inform their educational institutions of their disability status and arrange for accommodations. After the age of 21, schools are no longer required to keep IEPs (Wilkins, 2011a). Despite these limitations, many of the programs listed earlier may be accommodating to students with disabilities. For instance, Muller (2009) states that online/computer-based programs that allow students to move at their own pace and take place in a less traditional school setting may be ideal options. Overall, it is

important to note that the majority of the aforementioned strategies can be applied to students with disabilities as well. The task with special educated or disabled youth becomes identifying which services would be a suitable match depending on individual factors as well as the severity of the disability.

○ School Policies Related to Dropout Recovery

The National Dropout Prevention Center offers several policy modifications that can help decrease the dropout rate (Wilkins, 2011c). Given that funding for dropout is usually set aside for dropout prevention efforts, state funding and school improvement programs should explicitly support recovery as well. Options for students to earn a diploma, credit recovery and opportunity to earn credits for work or professional experiences, preparation for college or employment, and community partnerships (e.g., with community colleges) are alternative ways that schools can adjust their policies to address the dropout issue, even for those who have already left school (Wilkins, 2011c).

Many of the school policies that may be modified to help with dropout recovery are also pertinent to dropout prevention. Specifically, policies relating to attendance, grades, and exit exams may be adjusted to decrease the likelihood that students will drop out of school. For example, with regard to attendance policies, it is recommended that schools modify their response procedures when chronic absences occur so frequent truancies do not lead to dropout. Specifically, schools should initiate parent contacts after the very first absence instead of waiting for students to reach a certain criteria of consecutively missed days.

Also, age cutoffs that are enforced by compulsory education laws interfere with reenrollment for dropouts. In most cases, The National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices (2011) asserts that states have funding for students to graduate by the age of 21. This cutoff becomes problematic when dropouts attempt to return to school after this age and results in fewer options for reenrolling older students to obtain a high school diploma. Others push for options that legally require students to remain in school for longer. For instance, Legters and Balfanz (2010) recommend that raising the minimum age in which students can legally drop out, for instance, to 17 or 18 years-old, may help to reduce the dropout rate.

○ Summary

Given the multitude of problems associated with dropping out of school, it is surprising that a paucity of programs focus specifically on recovering dropouts. Although Steinberg and Almeida (2004) argue that college readiness must become the standard, the general consensus throughout the literature suggests that the ultimate goal of recovery programs should be preparing these individuals for life in general. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of dropout recovery programs as a whole has not been evaluated using rigorous experimental methods (Bloom, 2010). However, some of the specific programs mentioned above are supported by the research. For instance, preliminary evidence suggests that Job Corps and YouthBuild result in increased employment, although the effects are not consistently maintained over time (Bloom, 2010). This document sought to summarize programs that are commonly used to reenroll dropouts, as well as components that are consistent across them (e.g., flexible scheduling). In conclusion, as educators and researchers continue to combat the dropout problem, it is crucial

to pursue effective programs and practices that explicitly target individuals who have already dropped out of school in conjunction with prevention practices.

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