Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools

Recommendations and Strategies

With South Carolina Standards

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Recommendation 1

Monitor the progress of all students, and proactively intervene when students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems.

Recommendation 2

Provide intensive, individualized support to students who have fallen off track and face significant challenges to success.

Recommendation 3

Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school.

Recommendation 4

For schools with many at-risk students, create small, personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support.

This recommendation is one of four described in the Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools Practice Guide (Rumberger et al., 2017). Although each recommendation can be implemented independently, dropout prevention experts believe the recommendations will be most effective when implemented together as part of a cohesive approach.

Recommendation 1

Monitor the progress of all students, and proactively intervene when students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems.

Schools should regularly track data for all students and take action early when students show signs of struggling or appear to be at risk of not graduating on time. While it might seem natural to focus on students who are already far behind, this approach can miss those who are just beginning to become off track. By identifying and addressing issues early, schools can prevent bigger problems, reduce the time and resources needed to help students, and improve their chances of graduating on time.

Monitoring data also helps schools identify larger patterns that may be contributing to dropout rates, such as classes with high failure rates, low attendance during certain periods, or policies that unintentionally increase absences, such as frequent suspensions. Addressing these schoolwide issues can improve outcomes for all students.

Strategy 1

Organize and analyze data to identify students who miss school, have behavior problems, or are struggling in their courses.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Students who are at risk of dropping out or becoming off track for graduation often struggle with attendance, behavior, and academics. To identify students at risk, schools can use three key early warning indicators, commonly referred to as the ABCs.

- **A**ttendance: total attendance, unexcused absences, excused absences
- **B**ehavior: number of suspensions, office referral, and behavioral incidents
- **C**ourse performance: course completion, course grades, and intermediate outcomes such as tests and assignments

The ABC indicators (attendance, behavior, and course performance) are strong predictors of which students may be at risk of dropping out. While other challenges like bullying, homelessness, or family issues can also increase dropout risk, these factors are often reflected in a student's ABC data. For example, if a student is experiencing homelessness or housing instability, they are likely to also struggle with regular attendance.

Schools are encouraged to use historical ABC data to establish thresholds for the ABC indicators to identify when students need additional support. Each school district should set these thresholds based on its unique context, balancing the need for early intervention with the effort and resources required to provide support. See Table 1 for an example of different ABC thresholds.

Table 1. Examples of early warning indicators

Indicators	District 1	District 2	District 3
Attendance	Daily attendance of 90% or less	Daily attendance of 80% or less	Daily attendance of 95% or less
Behavior	Three or more days of suspension per semester	One or more office referrals per month	One or more days of suspension per semester
Course performance	Failure in ELA, math, or both and/or failing average in core classes	Failing grade in ELA or math	A semester grade of D or lower in ELA or math

Schools should consider the unintended consequences of their threshold decisions. For example, a higher threshold (e.g., 95% attendance) would allow schools to identify students earlier and intervene with less intensive efforts, but the higher threshold may also identify *false positives* (students who do not require support). A lower threshold (e.g., 85% attendance) would potentially identify fewer students and reduce the incidence of false positives, but it may also lead to *false negatives* and fail to identify students demonstrating early evidence of falling off track. Early identification and intervention are key to successfully preventing dropouts, so schools should set ABC thresholds carefully.

Schools can integrate ABC indicators into their daily operations using data systems, early warning tools, or even simple spreadsheets. Some districts have early warning systems, and many student information systems include dashboarding features that can be used to organize and visualize early warning indicator data (Regional Educational Laboratory [REL] West, 2018). Update and regularly review early warning data to identify students who need support rather than waiting until the end of a grading period. Tables 2 and 3 provide examples of how schools can use spreadsheets to track individual students and groups of students.

Organize the data to make it easy for staff to identify students who may be at risk of falling off track or dropping out. For example:

1. **Track Individual Students:** Summarize current and past attendance, behavior, and course performance data. Where possible, automate the systems to highlight data outside the thresholds to flag students needing support.
2. **Monitor Schoolwide Trends:** Analyze ABC indicators for patterns across classes, periods, or student groups. For example, if many students in first-period classes have increasing absences, it may indicate a broader problem, like difficulty arriving at school on time.

Table 2. Sample template for organizing data at the student level

Student ID	Last	First	Grading period	Current absences	Prior absences	Current behavior incidents	Prior behavior incidents	Current GPA	Prior Ds & Fs
12345	Robert	Dave	2	0	2	0	0	3.1	0
13568	Eide	Frank	2	0	0	0	0	2.5	0
45973	Smith	Mary	2	8	0	0	0	1.6	2
25897	Serio	Liz	2	2	0	4	0	2.2	1

Table 3. Sample template for organizing data at the school level

Month	Absence					Office referral					Grades				
	0	1	2	3	>3	0	1	2	3	>3	A	B	C	D	F
Aug	295	4	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Sept	229	12	48	5	6	0	21	2	0	0	35	100	140	25	10
Oct	202	31	32	15	20	0	30	3	0	1	40	95	135	30	10
Total	726	47	81	20	26	0	3	5	0	1	75	195	275	55	20

Examine ABC indicators at the school level to identify patterns and trends that might be related to dropping out. Create summaries of ABC indicators by subject, class, or specific groups of students. By summarizing ABC data for groups of students (e.g., ninth-grade boys), schools can focus resources where they're most needed and address issues proactively at both individual and group levels.

Schools should hold regular meetings—ideally weekly—for staff to review students' attendance, behavior, and course performance and to plan interventions for those at risk of falling off track. For schools with a small number of at-risk students, existing student support teams may take on this role. However, schools with a larger number of at-risk students may need dedicated teams, such as grade-level groups of teachers, counselors, and leaders, to focus on dropout prevention.

In addition to monitoring during the school year, schools should review ABC data from the previous year to identify students who may need extra support over the summer or at the start of the school year. Special attention should be given to transition years, such as sixth and ninth grades, when students are more likely to struggle even if they previously performed well. If widespread performance declines are seen during these years, schools should consider providing additional supports, like mentoring, academic assistance, or more closely tracking attendance, to help all students stay on track.

Example

At Jefferson High School, the leadership team has implemented an early warning system to identify students at risk of falling off track. The system leverages three primary indicators—attendance, behavior, and course performance (the ABCs)—to flag students who might benefit from additional support. To streamline their efforts, the school references a range of tools and thresholds to guide decision making.

The process begins with setting clear thresholds for each indicator, ensuring staff know when to flag a student for potential intervention. For example, the school defines "at risk" as missing 10% or more school days, missing a number of days that would prevent the student from meeting seat time requirements, receiving three or more behavior referrals, or earning a D or F in a course required for graduation. These thresholds align with evidence-based practices described in A Practitioner's Guide to Implementing Early Warning Systems (Frazelle & Nagel, 2015), which provides a comprehensive overview of how schools can organize data and interpret thresholds effectively.

Next, the school uses a template for organizing student-level data to track individual progress. This structure helps staff compare current and prior performance to identify trends and determine which students may require immediate support. The team references visual design principles outlined in the Tips for Visualizing Your Early Warning System (EWS) guide (REL Appalachia, n.d.) to ensure their tools are intuitive and actionable for educators. These visualizations make it easier to identify patterns in the data, such as students with declining attendance across grading periods or behavioral issues concentrated in a specific class.

Finally, school administrators review summaries of ABC indicators at the school level to identify broader patterns. For example, when the data revealed that most first-period absences were occurring in a specific grade level, the school adjusted bus schedules and introduced a breakfast program to address late arrivals. The school also uses infographics, such as those found in the REL West (2018) Data Visualization Can Help Educators Address Chronic Absence infographic, to communicate the importance of attendance to families and reinforce its connection to academic success.

By combining individual and school-level monitoring with actionable thresholds, Jefferson High School has created a system that supports both targeted interventions and systemic improvements. The school's ability to respond proactively ensures that at-risk students receive the help they need before falling further behind.

Strategy 2

Intervene with students who show early signs of falling off track.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate)

Use data to identify students in need of early support to keep them on track for graduation. Dropping out often begins gradually, with a failed course or a few absences. Without early intervention, these challenges can escalate, requiring more intensive efforts later. Early interventions can be tailored to individual students, groups, or the entire school. Examples of interventions are described below, but schools can use What Works Clearinghouse intervention reviews and resources like the Teacher-Delivered Behavioral Interventions in Grades K-5 (Lane et al., 2024) and the Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9 (Vaughn et al., 2022) Practice Guides as resources.

Academic Support Interventions:

- Provide extra help when students struggle with specific tests or assignments, rather than waiting until their grades drop significantly.
- Use gradebook data to flag students on the verge of failing (low Ds or high Fs) before the end of the grading period. Teachers with strong rapport can have one-on-one conversations to guide students on improving their grades.

Social and Emotional Support:

- Informally check in with students to understand why attendance, behavior, or grades are slipping. Quick conversations can reveal underlying issues, such as family, transportation, or personal challenges.
- Work with families to address barriers, like helping them set up a support network if transportation issues prevent attendance.

Group-Level Interventions:

- Identify patterns among groups of students, such as poor performance in math during the transition to high school. Provide targeted support, like double-dose math classes, led by experienced teachers to reinforce foundational skills and build confidence.

Schoolwide Interventions:

- Use data to identify systemic issues, such as high suspension rates contributing to excessive absences. Address these with alternatives like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), restorative practices, or in-school supervision. These changes reduce missed instruction time and disengagement, keeping students connected to school.

By acting early and tailoring interventions to the specific needs of students, groups, or the entire school, schools can prevent small issues from growing into major barriers to graduation.

Example

At Jefferson High School, the early warning system flagged several students for concerning patterns in their attendance, behavior, and course performance. To address these risks, the school implemented targeted interventions tailored to individual student needs, using a collaborative approach informed by best practices.

For example, Jamie, whose attendance had been inconsistent, was paired with a mentor who used insights from the Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline (REL Southwest, 2022). Together, they set small, achievable goals for improving her attendance, paired with rewards such as a weekly pass to the school's library study lounge. The team also communicated with Jamie's parents, emphasizing the importance of consistent attendance using strategies from the Getting Students Back in the Classroom: Responding to Chronic Absenteeism and Exclusionary Disciplinary Actions guide (Blumethnal et al., 2022).

Another student, Luis, had been involved in multiple behavioral incidents stemming from frustration with his math assignments. The school counselor introduced him to mindfulness techniques and structured routines informed by the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports guide (REL Northwest, 2024). These strategies included daily check-ins, behavior tracking sheets, and de-escalation techniques. Luis's math teacher provided additional scaffolding and regularly reinforced positive behaviors to create a more supportive classroom environment.

Meanwhile, for students with ongoing classroom challenges, the leadership team referenced Preventing and Addressing Behavior Problems—Tips from the What Works Clearinghouse (What Works Clearinghouse, n.d.) to develop proactive interventions. This included creating a peer support network to encourage positive social interactions and integrating behavior-focused professional development for teachers. Finally, John has not been turning in his English assignments for two weeks and has failed his weekly test. His English teacher checks in with him immediately, rather than waiting until the end of the semester, and realizes that he is struggling with writing. She implements some of the recommendations from the Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively Practice Guide (Graham et al., 2016), offers assistance during lunch breaks, and refers John to the homework club for additional help with assignments.

These targeted efforts were monitored during weekly leadership meetings where the team reviewed attendance logs, behavior reports, and academic progress. By combining evidence-based strategies with consistent monitoring, Jefferson High School tailored its interventions to the unique needs of its students, keeping them engaged and on track for success.

Strategy 3

If data show high rates of absenteeism, take steps to help students, parents, and school staff understand the importance of attending school daily.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Attendance is a key indicator of a student's risk of dropping out, so schools should closely monitor and emphasize its importance. Chronic absenteeism, generally defined as missing 10% of the school year (18 days in a 180-day year), can lead to students falling behind, feeling disengaged, and struggling to catch up.

It is important to set clear expectations for attendance and embed it in school culture. If schoolwide data show low attendance rates for many students, implement programs that reach all students, staff, and families to emphasize the importance of attendance for graduation. Examples of actions schools can take to promote regular attendance are described below.

Set Clear Expectations:

- Make attendance a core part of the school culture by setting and communicating clear expectations to students, families, and staff.
- Use visuals, like infographics or banners, to show how absences can add up, become chronic, and impact grades and graduation rates (see Figure 1). Place these visuals in common areas and distribute materials, such as "fridge magnets," to remind families of attendance goals.

Engage the School Community:

- Host family-student events to discuss the importance of attendance and its link to academic success. Use these meetings to share data, infographics, and actionable strategies for improving attendance.
- Train all school staff on the importance of regular attendance and model these expectations by ensuring staff attendance aligns with the school's messaging.

Target Schoolwide Attendance Issues:

- If data show patterns like low attendance in first-period classes, collaborate with families to develop practical solutions, such as carpools or wake-up calls.
- Implement broad programs that emphasize attendance for all students, staff, and families.

Incentives and Recognition:

- Motivate students, families, and staff by offering incentives for good or improved attendance. This could include rewards for classes with the best attendance or recognition for individuals who show significant improvement.
- Hold inter-class competitions to promote friendly competition and engagement.

By embedding attendance into the school's culture, using clear communication tools, and rewarding positive behavior, schools can reduce chronic absenteeism and help students stay on track for graduation.

Figure 1. Sample visual showing how absences can add up to chronic absenteeism during a school year

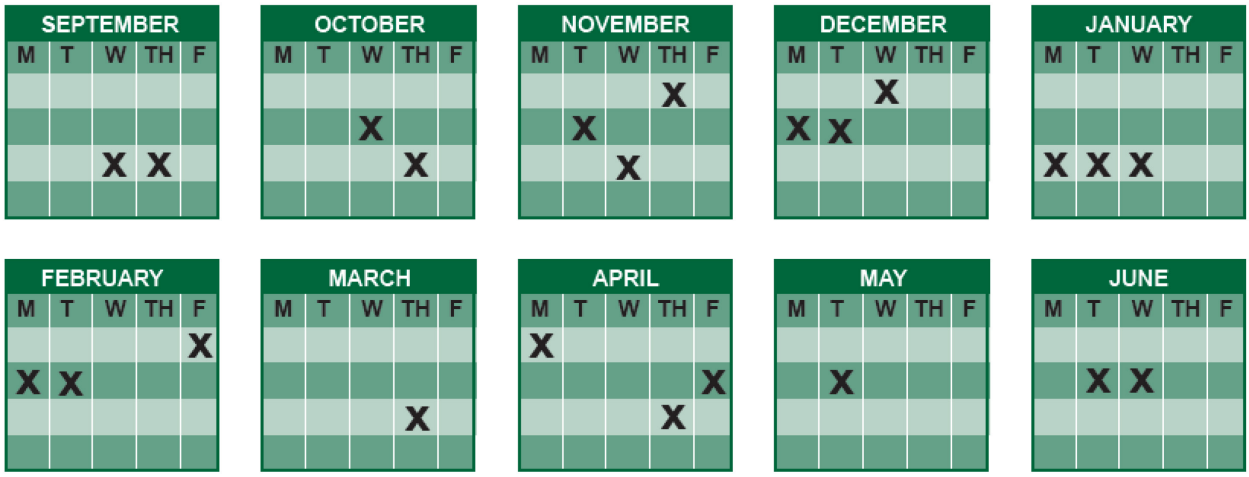

Figure 2. Sample banner on attendance levels

How is YOUR Attendance?				
Very Chronically Absent Below 85% More than 27 absences	Chronically Absent 85%–90% 18–27 absences	At Risk 91%–95% 9–17 absences	Acceptable 96%–99% 1–8 absences	Perfect 100% 0 absences

Example

At Jefferson High School, the leadership team prioritized improving attendance after data revealed that 15% of students were chronically absent. Using a schoolwide approach, they explored evidence-based strategies, including those described in REL Northwest's Four Strategies to Increase Student Attendance Through Personalized Family Messaging blog (McCormick, 2023), and used guidance from the Applying a Cycle of Evidence-Based Continuous Improvement When Selecting Interventions and Project Components to Improve Attendance guide (REL West, 2024) to implement targeted strategies to address attendance challenges and make it a central part of the school culture.

For example, Mia, a 10th-grade student who had missed 20 days in the previous school year, was identified early through attendance monitoring. During a meeting with Mia and her parents, staff learned that her absences were due to unreliable transportation. The school connected her family with a carpool network and provided bus passes as a backup option. Mia was also enrolled in the school's attendance reward program, earning small prizes for consecutive weeks of perfect attendance.

Meanwhile, the data highlighted that a significant number of ninth-grade students were consistently late to their first-period classes. To address this trend, the school launched a "Start Strong" initiative. Staff worked with families to identify barriers to punctuality, such as oversleeping, and introduced wake-up call reminders led by student leaders.

The school also implemented a first-period competition where classes with the highest attendance rates won a group reward, like a pizza party. The district also created a committee to explore options to adjust school schedules and move the start of the high school day to 8:45am.

To raise awareness about the importance of attendance, the principal hosted a family night, presenting an infographic that visually linked attendance rates to academic performance and graduation outcomes. Families received "attendance magnets" to display at home, listing important milestones like the maximum number of absences allowable per quarter. Teachers were also trained to recognize early signs of chronic absenteeism and encouraged to celebrate small attendance improvements with students.

These efforts were supported by visuals placed throughout the school, including banners promoting attendance goals and posters showing how absences accumulate over time. Weekly staff meetings included updates on attendance data, and successes were shared to keep the momentum going. By combining individual support, group interventions, and schoolwide initiatives, Jefferson High School fostered a culture where attendance was valued, leading to a 10% decrease in chronic absenteeism within the year.

Strategy 4

Monitor progress and adjust interventions as needed.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of interventions by reviewing data on students' attendance, behavior, and course performance during team meetings. The frequency of monitoring should align with the intervention and the student's specific needs. For example:

- **Quarterly or semester monitoring** might be sufficient for interventions like a double-dose algebra class, which targets performance and grades in math.
- **Daily or weekly monitoring** may be needed for issues like chronic absenteeism, where immediate changes in attendance are expected.

Schools should also track the impact of schoolwide interventions, such as attendance incentives, by analyzing data at the school level during team meetings.

If data show no improvement, consider whether adjustments are needed. First, confirm that the intervention is being implemented correctly. If not, provide additional support to ensure students, families, or staff are able to follow through with their commitments or implement the intervention. If the intervention is implemented as intended but still isn't effective, explore alternate strategies or more intensive support. Tailoring the approach based on ongoing data ensures interventions remain effective and responsive to student needs.

Example

Michael, a ninth-grade student at Jefferson High School, was sent to the office multiple times in a two-week span for disruptive behavior in class. Recognizing the issue, the school counselor arranged for Michael to attend a weekly social-emotional skills group designed to help students manage frustration and build positive relationships. However, Michael only attended the group sporadically and also began skipping class. The counselor gave him a signature form that his teachers needed to sign each period to confirm he was in class. The counselor also asked the group facilitator to sign the form whenever Michael attended the sessions.

When reviewing the form a week later, the counselor noticed Michael only had a few signatures, indicating his attendance and behavior were not improving. Concerned that these issues would soon affect his academic performance, the counselor decided to try another strategy. He paired Michael with a peer mentor—a senior student who would walk with him to classes and attend the social-emotional skills group alongside him.

For the next three weeks, the counselor continued monitoring Michael's progress through his signature forms. While Michael's attendance slightly improved, his teachers reported that his disruptive behavior persisted. It became clear that Michael was not responding to the current interventions. The counselor decided it was time to connect Michael with an adult advocate, who could build a stronger relationship with him, uncover underlying challenges, and coordinate more intensive, individualized support to keep him on track for graduation.

Potential Roadblock 1

"We often do not know about course failure until the end of the grading period, when it is too late to do anything."

Suggested Approach. Use real-time data directly from teachers' attendance and gradebooks. When teachers and other staff meet to discuss the data, they can make decisions by sharing their real-time data about student grades and attendance during the meetings. This will facilitate more timely monitoring and intervention.

Potential Roadblock 2

"We already address academic-performance problems through retention and credit recovery, so additional interventions are not needed."

Suggested Approach. It is better to intervene and engage students before they fail courses, because students are more likely to stay on track and graduate if they pass courses, rather than taking credit-recovery courses. This is especially true when credit-recovery courses are offered online, as these courses may not provide students with the personal support and flexibility needed to understand the complex material with which they originally had difficulty.

Treat retention and credit recovery as a last resort for students who are academically behind. Instead, intervene earlier, when students begin to miss coursework or receive their first D or F in a class. Provide tutoring, homework help, or other academic support. This approach may also save resources by replacing retention and credit-recovery courses, which are more expensive, with lower-cost interventions such as peer tutoring.

Potential Roadblock 3

"Only our school administrator has access to the data reports and dashboards of our district early warning system."

Suggested Approach. Staff addressing dropout issues should have access to student data on attendance, behavior, and course performance (ABC indicators). In some cases, staff may need additional data relevant to a specific situation. However, to protect student privacy, sensitive data cannot be shared with everyone and must comply with federal laws like FERPA and HIPAA.

Data systems often allow for different levels of access to ensure compliance with legal requirements. Schools should use these features or consult their district to clarify which staff members are authorized to access specific reports. If some staff cannot access sensitive data, schools can create summaries or aggregate reports to share relevant insights without revealing private details. Staff with access to restricted data should prepare and distribute these reports to other team members as part of their role.

Potential Roadblock 4

"Our staff do not have time during their regular work day for meetings with their colleagues to address dropout issues."

Suggested Approach. School staff often have limited time for meetings and/or teacher contracts may limit or prohibit meeting outside of the contract day. Despite these limitations, regular collaboration is essential to effectively address dropout issues and use early warning systems. To make these meetings manageable:

1. **Integrate into Schedules:** Dedicate time during regular grade-level or team meetings to discuss at-risk students. This ensures dropout prevention is part of the routine.
2. **Minimize Workload:** Use resources like data coaches or community organizations to prepare early warning reports, facilitate meetings, and suggest interventions. This reduces the preparation burden on staff.
3. **Streamline Discussions:** If time is limited, assign staff to review data for specific students before meetings, using the meeting time to share insights and recommend interventions.
4. **Offer Flexible Options:** During busy periods, replace in-person meetings with virtual or asynchronous options, allowing staff to provide input electronically during the school day.

Additional Resources

A Practitioner's Guide to Implementing Early Warning Systems (Frazelle & Nagel, 2015) provides a comprehensive guide to implementing and refining early warning systems (EWS) in middle and high schools. It includes practical strategies for identifying at-risk students through the use of attendance, behavior, and course performance data, while also emphasizing the importance of tailoring systems to specific school contexts. The report highlights how schools can develop actionable intervention plans based on EWS data and integrate these systems into existing school practices. It also discusses challenges such as data management and staff training, offering solutions to ensure effective implementation.

The A Practitioner's Guide to Implementing Early Warning Systems summary document (REL Mid-Atlantic, 2015) provides concise overviews of various early warning system implementations across schools and districts. It highlights how different institutions have successfully used data to identify at-risk students and intervene effectively. The summaries focus on practical applications, such as setting data thresholds, organizing monitoring teams, and designing targeted interventions for attendance, behavior, and academic challenges. These case studies offer insights into how schools can tailor EWS approaches to their unique contexts, emphasizing adaptability and proactive measures to support student success.

WestEd has complied dropout prevention resources (WestEd, 2025c) that complement the Preventing Dropout in Secondary School Practice Guide. These resources include tools and professional development material that can be used to support implementation of early warning data systems (WestEd, 2025b).

Applying a Cycle of Evidence-Based Continuous Improvement When Selecting Interventions and Project Components to Improve Attendance (REL West, 2024) provides an overview and example of how districts can apply a cycle of continuous improvement when selecting attendance interventions or project components.

Many states, districts and schools are developing strategies to reduce chronic absence and ensure students attend school regularly. While many proposed interventions and project components to reduce chronic absence and support attendance exist, it is important to view them within a cycle of evidence-based continuous improvement.

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Recommendation 1

Monitor the progress of all students, and proactively intervene when students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems.

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Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school.

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This recommendation is one of four described in the Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools Practice Guide (Rumberger et al., 2017). Although each recommendation can be implemented independently, dropout prevention experts believe the recommendations will be most effective when implemented together as part of a cohesive approach.

Recommendation 2

Provide intensive, individualized support to students who have fallen off track and face significant challenges to success.

Students who are already off track, who have not responded to the interventions described in Recommendation 1, or who must overcome large personal obstacles may require more intensive and individualized support. Examples of the types of students who may require individualized support include the following.

- **Students who are already off track.** It is important to intervene as early as possible, but students who are chronically absent (i.e., less than 90% attendance), are earning D's and F's in core classes, and/or who have frequent behavioral incidents may need support of greater intensity than the interventions described in Recommendation 1.
- **Students who have not responded to early interventions.** Like in most multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), some students may not respond to the type of tier 1 interventions described in Recommendation 1. Regularly monitoring attendance, behavior, and course performance (ABC) indicator data can help staff identify which students are not responding to tier 1 interventions.
- **Students who face multiple or acute personal obstacles.** Students who are experiencing housing instability and trauma, or students with significant family care responsibilities, may require intensive individualized support.

Strategy 1

For each student identified as needing individualized support, assign a single person to be the student's primary advocate.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations)

Provide students identified as needing individualized support with an adult advocate who is responsible for helping students get back on track for graduation. The advocate is the "go-to person" who helps the student stay on track for graduation by maintaining regular communication, offering support, and monitoring their progress. Advocates provide students and their families with a trusted connection within the school and can act as a liaison among students, their families, and school staff.

If possible, the same advocates should provide year-round support to students through graduation, including summer, school breaks, and transitions. This allows the advocates to build strong relationships with students and their families and helps students stay engaged by connecting them with summer school, youth activities, or employment opportunities. While supporting students over the summer may be challenging, it is critical for their long-term success.

For students with complex challenges, the advocate may take on the additional role of case manager, coordinating support from multiple sources. This can include connecting students to counseling, tutoring, or community programs. For example, a case manager can connect parenting students to child care resources. If the advocate cannot manage this role alone, another staff member may assist, working closely with the advocate to develop and implement an individual case plan. Case managers can also provide direct services, such as leading groups or providing individual counseling. See Table 1 for a summary of key responsibilities of advocates and case managers.

Use attendance, behavior, and course performance indicator data (ABC) to monitor and assess how students respond to the advocate intervention. Schools can apply the principles of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to determine if a student should continue to work with an advocate, be provided with more intensive interventions, or be removed from service.

Table 1. Advocate and case manager responsibilities

Advocate	Case Manager
• Build and nurture strong relationships with students and their families • Develop an individualized plan for each student • Monitor each student's attendance, behavior, and course performance (ABC) • Act as a liaison between students, families, and the school • Act as the "go-to" person at school for each student on their caseload	• Link students to community and school-based resources • Coordinate services from school and the community • Provide direct service, such as counseling or groups

Consider the capacity of the advocate and the needs of their students when assigning caseloads. Full-time advocates working with students with intense needs should have no more than 20 students. Advocates with students who have fewer demands may be able to manage larger caseloads (50–100 students). To ensure that advocates have the time and resources to support the students on their caseloads, avoid assigning advocates additional responsibilities (e.g., covering classes) that take away from their primary role. Advocates, especially those supporting high-need students, may need to respond quickly to students in crisis, conduct home visits, and be accessible outside of regular working days and hours. Schools may also hire advocates from the community who may have more flexible schedules and a deeper connection to the students' communities.

When possible, assign advocates to students who are from the same community and who share similar social, cultural, and linguistics backgrounds. This may make it easier to develop strong relationships and facilitate communication, especially if the family speaks languages other than English. Additionally, advocates who have experience with the communities in which their students live may have a better understanding of resources that may be available.

Whether school or community-based, advocates should have the following skills and qualifications:

- Advocacy and communication skills, such as the ability to negotiate, compromise, and confront conflict constructively
- Familiarity with the schools and community resources
- A belief that all students have abilities
- Willingness to work cooperatively with families and school staff

Example

The Jefferson High School leadership team identified 80 students at the highest risk of dropping out based on factors like chronic absenteeism, low grades, and disciplinary issues. These students were assigned to four full-time advocates, each with a caseload of 20 students. Advocates were matched with students based on shared cultural or community backgrounds, whenever possible. For example, a bilingual advocate fluent in Spanish was assigned to work with Spanish-speaking students and their families to bridge communication gaps.

To ensure consistent support, each advocate's role was dedicated exclusively to working with students. They were not assigned additional duties like covering classes or lunch supervision, allowing them to focus on building relationships and providing support.

Jefferson High structured the program so advocates could also act as case managers for students with the most complex needs. For example, one advocate, Ms. Rivera, supported a student who struggled with anger management and poor attendance. As a case manager, she referred the student to the school counselor for weekly anger management sessions and connected him with an after-school tutoring program to improve his grades. For students facing food insecurity, advocates worked with local food banks and community organizations to ensure families received weekly groceries.

Advocates also created individual case plans tailored to each student's needs. For a student who was experiencing housing instability, her advocate helped secure temporary housing through a local nonprofit and ensured she had transportation to school.

The leadership team at Jefferson High made several structural changes to support the advocates:

- **Reasonable Caseloads:** Advocates' caseloads were limited to 20 students, ensuring they had time to build strong relationships and provide personalized support.
- **Summer Support:** Advocates were employed year-round, allowing them to check in with students during summer breaks, connect them with summer school opportunities, and help find summer employment.
- **Training and Professional Development:** Advocates received training on trauma-responsive practices, conflict resolution, and how to connect students with community resources.

Strategy 2

Develop a menu of support options that advocates can use to help students.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations)

Create a menu of available support services, both within the school and in the surrounding community, to address students' varied needs. This menu should include options such as:

- Academic assistance
- Behavioral interventions
- Mentoring
- Resources to meet basic needs (e.g., food and school supplies)
- College planning and preparation
- Incentives for improved behavior
- Family support services

Advocates should regularly monitor students' attendance, behavior, and course performance—daily if needed—to determine the appropriate support and adjust interventions as necessary. Since no single solution works for all students, advocates can use the support menu to develop individualized plans based on whether a student requires basic or intensive support. For example:

- **Basic supports:** Some students may benefit from feedback on academic progress, discussions about staying in school, or problem-solving strategies.
- **Intensive supports:** Other students might require social-skills groups, one-on-one mentoring, family problem-solving sessions, or individualized academic contracts.

Schools can also use evidence-based resources, such as those from What Works Clearinghouse, to identify effective interventions tailored to specific challenges. For example, a school seeking to improve literacy could find research-backed programs proven to help English language learners or improve skills like reading comprehension.

Table 2. Sample support menu

Intensity	Student Support: Attendance	Student Support: Behavior	Student Support: Course Performance	Family Support
Basic	Provide wake-up calls Organize transportation to school Offer attendance incentives	Conduct social skills training groups Provide peer mentoring	Refer to after-school homework help Follow-up daily on assignments	Provide tips on monitoring behavior and course performance
Intensive	Escort students from class to class Create attendance contract	Provide individual counseling Create and monitor daily behavior contract	Provide one-on-one tutoring Create individual performance contract with student and parent	Provide help accessing social services Home visits (Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic, 2021)

Strategy 3

Support advocates with ongoing professional learning opportunities and tools for tracking their work.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 8 (Staff Development) Relations)

Supporting students with intensive, individualized needs starts with ensuring their advocates receive the training and support they need to succeed. New advocates should be thoroughly trained on how to use data systems, identify student needs, select appropriate services, and engage with students and families with cultural awareness and respect. While technical skills can be taught in training sessions, building strong relationships with students who face significant challenges is best learned through hands-on experience. Pairing new advocates with experienced staff for shadowing and mentoring allows them to observe effective strategies and learn on the job.

Regular collaboration is also essential for advocates to succeed. Scheduled meetings with mentors and fellow advocates provide opportunities to review student progress, reassess needs, and brainstorm new approaches. When case management is handled by a separate staff member, including them in these meetings helps align efforts and ensures that everyone involved is on the same page.

To help advocates stay organized and track their work, schools should provide access to robust monitoring systems. These systems should allow advocates to log contacts, monitor student progress, and update intervention plans as needed. For example, if a student struggles with attendance, advocates need real-time access to attendance data to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts and adjust strategies as necessary. Similarly, case managers should receive updates on how students are responding to community resources, helping them determine whether those resources are effective or if a different approach is needed. Monitoring systems can be embedded in student information systems, early warning systems, or case management software. They can also be simple spreadsheets like the example in Table 3 or monitoring tools like this example (WestEd, n.d.). Supervisors and school leaders should periodically review advocates' logs and monitoring sheets to verify that students are receiving sufficient services and identify training and professional support needs.

Table 3. Sample monitoring log

Student Name	Intervention	ABC Type	Start Date	End Date	Contact	Log/Comments
Joe Wolfe	Study hall for Alg 1	Course performance	01/06/25		Weekly	**01/26/25**. Joe attended study hall M–F. **02/03/25**. Joe attended study hall M–F. He said it is helping him. Mr. Stone said he passed weekly test.
Marcus Guest	Attendance checks	Attendance	11/15/24		Weekly	**12/01/24**. Marcus did not get signatures from all his teachers. **12/13/25**. Marcus did not get signatures from all his teachers. We will need to walk him to class daily.
David Smith	Conflict resolution group	Behavior	02/05/25		Daily	**02/16/25**. Have been meeting David daily. He has not received office referrals for two weeks. Starting next week, I will reduce contact to twice a week. **02/03/16**. Have been meeting David daily. He had 1 office referral this week. Will continue daily contact.

Example

Sophia is a new advocate at Jefferson High School. She was initially assigned a small caseload of five students who were at high risk of dropping out due to challenges like chronic absenteeism, behavioral issues, and poor academic performance. To prepare, Sophia spent two weeks shadowing her mentor, Mr. Carter, an experienced advocate. During this time, she observed how he supported his students, coordinated services, and worked with teachers and families to address individual student needs.

One day, Sophia accompanied Mr. Carter to a meeting with a student named Maya, who had been skipping school due to anxiety about her coursework and tension with a teacher. Mr. Carter reassured Maya that her feelings were valid and reminded her that he was there to help.

He worked with Maya to create a plan, including attending a lunchtime homework club to get extra help and scheduling a mediation session with the teacher to rebuild trust. Sophia watched as Mr. Carter followed up with Maya's parents, providing updates and connecting them with community counseling services to support Maya's emotional needs.

After her training period, Sophia began meeting with her assigned students. She continued weekly check-ins with Mr. Carter to review each student's progress, discuss her plans for addressing their needs, and troubleshoot challenges. For example, when one of Sophia's students, Kevin, was still skipping classes despite her initial efforts, Mr. Carter suggested additional strategies, including daily check-ins and creating a personalized incentive system tied to Kevin's attendance.

Over the next three months, Sophia's confidence grew, and her meetings with Mr. Carter gradually transitioned to monthly check-ins. Her caseload increased to 20 students as she demonstrated her ability to manage more complex cases. Mr. Carter continued to review Sophia's logs quarterly, tracking her students' attendance, behavior, and course performance progress. During these reviews, he provided feedback and new ideas for supporting her students more effectively. Through this mentoring process and regular feedback, Sophia became a skilled advocate, making a meaningful difference in the lives of her students.

Potential Roadblock 1

"My students with special needs already have case managers. Providing them with an advocate will duplicate work and cause confusion."

Suggested Approach. The roles and responsibilities of a special education case manager are limited to ensuring that students with special needs are on track to meet the goals listed in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) or to dealing with administrative issues relating to the provision of special education services. They do not typically address other student needs or problems (e.g., experiencing homelessness or mental health challenges) or coordinate services such as counseling to help students stay on track for graduation. To avoid confusion about roles and responsibilities, clearly define and explain the role of the advocate or case manager to the school staff.

Potential Roadblock 2

"My school doesn't have funds to pay for advocates and engage in this type of close monitoring."

Suggested Approach. Consider applying for local or state ESSA funds (e.g., Title I, Part H funds). Schools can also partner with other schools to share mentors or work with local or national organizations, such as local colleges, AmeriCorps, or other community-based organizations to provide volunteer advocates. Alternatively, hire additional staff only for students with the most complex cases. If a school is unable to find advocates, consider reorganizing existing staff workloads or courseloads to create capacity to take on a caseload.

Potential Roadblock 3

"We hired advocates from outside the school, and they are experiencing resistance from other staff and are having difficulty accessing student data due to confidentiality concerns."

Suggested Approach. Administrative support is essential for integrating hired advocates and case managers into schools. Building trust and rapport with school staff takes time, but administrators can help by clearly defining roles and fostering collaboration. Strategies include:

- **Facilitating Integration:** Encourage advocates to attend regular staff meetings and participate in professional development sessions. Share with teachers how communicating with advocates (via text, call, or email) enhances their effectiveness.
- **Clarifying Roles:** Create resource maps that outline staff roles and available services, helping staff understand how advocates fit into the school's priorities and unique needs.
- **Aligning Priorities:** Ensure advocates' work aligns with the school's goals and hold them accountable for addressing students' needs within the school's context.
- **Addressing Privacy Concerns:** Use data systems with tiered access to provide advocates with only the information necessary to support their students. For example, advocates may need to know a student is homeless to address attendance issues but do not need access to unrelated sensitive information.

Additional Resources

WestEd has compiled dropout prevention resources (WestEd, 2025c) that complement the Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools Practice Guide (Rumberger et al., 2017). These resources include tools and professional development material that can be used to support implementation of adult advocate systems (WestEd, 2025a).

Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools

Recommendation 1
Monitor the progress of all students, and proactively intervene when students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems.

Recommendation 2
Provide intensive, individualized support to students who have fallen off track and face significant challenges to success.

Recommendation 3
Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school.

Recommendation 4
For schools with many at-risk students, create small, personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support.

This recommendation is one of four described in the Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools Practice Guide (Rumberger et al., 2017). Although each recommendation can be implemented independently, dropout prevention experts believe the recommendations will be most effective when implemented together as part of a cohesive approach.

Recommendation 3

Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school.

Student engagement occurs when students find their classes meaningful, feel a sense of belonging, and maintain strong relationships with teachers, peers, families, and the school community. Engagement is important because it leads to positive behaviors such as good attendance, preparedness, and improved course performance, reinforcing students' connection to school. Disengagement can stem from feelings of irrelevance, lack of capability, or an unsafe environment.

Schools should implement proactive, schoolwide strategies and targeted interventions for at-risk students to address disengagement. These approaches should focus on making instruction relevant, fostering supportive relationships, and helping students navigate challenges.

Strategy 1

Directly connect schoolwork to students' options after high school.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations)

Schools and teachers should emphasize making schoolwork relevant by directly linking it to students' post-high school options, such as careers or further education. Schools can implement this by offering curricula and programs aligned with specific career pathways or postsecondary education goals, providing students with a clear connection between their academic work and future opportunities. For career-focused programs, schools can provide integrated courses that blend career and academic subjects, as well as dual-enrollment opportunities with local colleges Access the WWC Intervention Report: Career Academies (What Works Clearinghouse, 2015) and these infographics (Regional Educational Laboratory [REL] Midwest, 2021) for a summary of findings and evidence supporting this model). For college-focused programs, students' graduation plans should include sufficient dual-credit courses and support, such as supplemental math or English classes, to succeed in college preparatory work. Schools should also increase the relevancy of coursework by creating a continuum of experiential learning outside the classroom. The continuum may build in complexity as students move up through grades, possibly culminating with an internship in 12th grade. Such experiences build awareness in students between what they are learning and their future careers or aspirations. Post-high school transitions for students with disabilities should be considered and planned for in both career and college-focused programs (for more information, see Facilitating Postsecondary Success: Strategies to Remove Service Roadblocks for Students with Disabilities [REL Mid-Atlantic, 2024]). Intentionally connecting school and students' future choices helps foster collaboration among teachers to create a cohesive schoolwide curriculum and ensures students see the value of their education and remain engaged in their academic journey.

Example

At Lincoln High School, the faculty implemented a career-focused program centered on health sciences to help students see the relevance of their coursework. Ninth-grade students explore careers in healthcare through guest lectures and field trips to local hospitals. By 10th grade, they take integrated courses like "Biology for Healthcare Professionals," which combines biology concepts with real-world applications, such as understanding how cells function in medical treatments. Starting in 11th grade, students can enroll in dual-enrollment courses at the nearby community college to earn both high school and college credits in subjects like anatomy and pharmacology. Senior year culminates in a hands-on internship at local clinics, where students apply their learning in a professional setting. Throughout the program, students create individualized graduation plans to ensure they complete the required dual-credit courses and receive extra support, such as advanced writing workshops, to prepare for college-level work. This continuum of relevant, experiential learning fosters engagement and connects students' academic efforts to their future aspirations.

The following tables provide additional examples from the Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools Practice Guide (Rumberger, 2017).

Table 1. Checklist for effective college-focused programs

Key elements of college focused programs	Examples of elements in practice
All students receive college preparation coursework and any additional academic support needed to meet these expectations.	Each student's graduation plan aligns with course requirements for admission to the state's university system, such as a minimum of four years of math and two years of a laboratory science. Students who enter ninth grade behind in math get a daily supplemental math course to get them back on track for meeting college entrance requirements.
The school has an established partnership with a local college. As part of this partnership, a college faculty member serves as a liaison between the college and the school.	School leadership partners with the chair of the psychology department at a local community college. The department chair acts as the primary contact for designing a dual-enrollment course, facilitating college tours, and establishing dual-credit agreements.
Students' course of study includes dual-enrollment courses that allow students to experience college-level coursework.	School leadership and a faculty member at a local community college work together to design a college course that teaches critical-thinking skills, with a focus on writing and presentations. The course introduces students to the rigors of college coursework and shows students that they belong in a college environment.
Students' course of study allows them to earn college credits, with an explicit goal of having a degree or certain number of transferable credits upon graduation.	Each student's graduation plan results in up to two years of college credit that can be transferred to a four-year institution and/or result in an associate's degree. Credit is earned through dual-enrollment courses offered at a nearby college and dual-credit classes offered at the high school that qualify for both high school and college credit.

Table 2. Checklist for effective career-focused programs

Key elements of career focused programs	Examples of elements in practice
Learning materials are chosen and adapted to focus on an industry that is connected to regional workforce needs.	The school reviews data from the local and state economic and workforce-development agencies and identifies health science as a high-demand industry in their area. The school then chooses learning materials that focus on careers within the health science industry, such as patient care and community health.
The career coursework and experiences are aligned with industry standards.	An engineering program aligns coursework with manufacturing industry standards for entry-level employment. The school establishes an industry advisory board with local employers to identify relevant certification standards.
The academic curriculum enables students to learn skills related to the industry.	Students in a medical sciences program learn to calculate medication dosages in their Algebra I class or study biometrics in their statistics class.
Local community colleges or technical schools advise on the industry-related curriculum and relevant student outcomes.	A school focused on advanced manufacturing partners with the local technical college to offer a dual-credit course in computer-integrated manufacturing. A representative from the college serves on the school's industry advisory board to advise on the manufacturing training curriculum.
Students participate in work-based learning that links classroom activities with work experiences, such as job shadowing and career mentoring.	A school focused on hospitality and tourism partners with local employers to offer job-shadowing experiences at area hotels and tourist attractions over spring break.
Counselors create an individualized graduation plan (or Individualized Career Plan [REL Southwest, 2024]) for each student based on students' career and education goals.	Starting in ninth grade, students work with their counselors to complete individual graduation plans. Plans align students' career goals with their course of study, work, and extracurricular experiences, as well as give students feedback on how their academic progress relates to their post–high school goals.
The career coursework is regularly evaluated against student outcomes and the needs of local industry and partners.	At the end of every year, a team of school staff examines academic outcomes (such as test scores) and measures of student engagement (such as climate surveys and attendance rates) to evaluate how the program can better meet student needs. Data are shared with the industry advisory board for input on how the program can be more relevant to local employers.

Table 3. Sample University of California Curriculum Integration courses that integrate academic and career technical education content

The University of California Curriculum Integration (UCCI) office develops courses that integrate academic subjects with career technical education content. UCCI courses also meet the University of California standards for course content and rigor needed to count toward admission to the University of California or California State University systems.

Examples of courses:

Physics and Engineering: Motion by Design

Students develop an understanding of fundamental concepts in physics and engineering and apply these concepts to a product-design cycle. Students design marketable products and develop skills in computer programming, 3-D modeling, and engineering technology. Assignments include designing a rotating pulley using computer-assisted design (CAD) software and producing a quality-control report that includes data from product testing.

✓Meets the University of California standards for a laboratory science course.

English 12 and Entrepreneurship: The Business of Agriculture

Students learn about the agriculture industry while building the communication, critical-thinking, and business skills needed to develop and pitch a business plan. Students develop knowledge and skills in conducting research, reading nonfiction, oral communication, legal concepts, and marketing. Assignments include a group project analyzing and presenting solutions to sustainability issues within the California almond industry and developing a business plan based on an analysis of market opportunities within their neighborhood.

✓Meets the University of California standards for an English course.

Table 4. Sample college-focused lessons that teach specific academic standards

The Realizing the College Dream curriculum guide (Educational Credit Management Corporation, n.d.) offers ideas for lessons that increase students' awareness of college while also teaching middle school and high school academic standards in core subject areas. An example follows.

Lesson

Students compare and contrast different financial-aid packages from four different institutions for a fictional student, building an understanding of concepts such as net cost and the basic types of financial aid. Students present the advantages and disadvantages of each financial-aid package and present their recommendation for the college they think the student should attend, and why.

Related Mathematics and Social Studies Standards (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and National Council for the Social Studies):

- *Mathematics number and operations:* Students develop fluency in operations with real numbers, vectors, and matrices, using mental computation or paper-and-pencil calculations for simple cases and technology for more complicated cases; students judge the reasonableness of numerical computations and their results.
- *Production, distribution, and consumption:* Learners expand their knowledge of economic concepts and principles, and use economic reasoning processes in addressing issues related to the four fundamental economic questions (6th–8th grades).

Table 5. Continuum of experiential learning

	Ninth Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade
Health careers academy	Employees from the local hospital discuss their professions at career day.	Students complete a spring break job shadowing experience at the local hospital, learning about different medical careers.	Students take a medical clinical class that combines instruction in clinical skills with a twice weekly internship at the local hospital.	The summer after junior year, students complete an internship in the medical field.
Early college pathway	Alumni who are enrolled in college return to talk with students about their experience.	Students tour area colleges and prepare a presentation about a college they are interested in attending, including admissions requirements, academic programs, and extracurricular opportunities.	Students complete college essays during their English language arts class and compare financial aid packages during math or social studies class.	Students complete a dual enrollment course at the local community college.

Strategy 2

Provide curricula and programs that help students build supportive relationships and teach students how to manage challenges.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision) Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership); Standard 4 (Climate); Standard 7 (Interpersonal Skills), Standard 8 (Staff development)

Non-academic skills play an important role in improving student engagement and academic outcomes (see the Four Pillars of Support for High School Students' College and Career Readiness infographic [REL Appalachia, 2022]). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identifies five key non-academic competencies crucial for success: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Schools should implement explicit training on these skills through classroom curricula or separate programs tailored to students' engagement levels. These programs can teach skills such as stress management, decision making in high-stakes situations, and setting and tracking goals. Fostering positive relationships with peers, teachers, and families helps students feel a sense of belonging and reduces disengagement.

For students at risk of low engagement, schools can offer targeted programs such as peer mentoring for transitions or those showing signs of disengagement. For example, older students trained as mentors can lead group sessions for younger students, helping them build non-academic skills and form positive peer relationships. To benefit all students, non-academic skill instruction can be integrated into daily classroom activities, such as group work lessons that emphasize constructive collaboration and reflection. Teachers should also be trained to reinforce these skills and foster trust during everyday interactions. Districts and states can support schools and teachers by developing grade-specific benchmarks and providing opportunities for students to practice skills through role-playing, service-learning projects, and internships. These strategies ensure students can apply non-academic skill competencies both in and out of school, fostering a supportive environment that enhances engagement and long-term success. To learn more about teaching nonacademic strategies to support students' postsecondary transitions, access the Building Bridges to College and Career - Supporting Self-Efficacy: Training Materials (Park & Biagas, 2019) and Building Bridges to College and Career: Social Emotional Preparation materials (Campbell et al., 2019).

Example

At Lincoln High School, non-academic skills are integrated into the school culture through classroom activities, mentorship programs, and community engagement. In English class, students practice self-awareness and responsible decision making by analyzing characters' actions in literature and discussing how these relate to real-life choices. For example, after reading a novel, students reflect on a character's challenges and write about how they might handle similar situations in their own lives.

The school also offers a peer mentoring program for incoming ninth-graders to ease their transition to high school. Trained 11th-graders and 12th-graders meet weekly with small groups of new ninth-graders to lead discussions on topics like time management, conflict resolution, and building positive relationships. Mentors use real-life examples and role-playing activities to help younger students develop strategies for navigating academic and social challenges.

In addition to classroom integration, Lincoln High School provides dual-credit leadership courses where students learn advanced skills, such as stress management and public speaking, while organizing a schoolwide event like a wellness fair. Teachers reinforce these skills daily by fostering a sense of belonging through class discussions and recognizing students' efforts to improve.

The school partners with local organizations to provide service-learning opportunities for juniors and seniors. For instance, students participating in a community food bank project use teamwork and problem-solving skills to organize a distribution event. These experiences allow students to practice non-academic competencies in real-world contexts, reinforcing their connection between schoolwork and life beyond graduation.

The following tables provide additional examples from the Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools Practice Guide (Rumberger et al., 2017).

Table 6. CASEL Framework for Social and Emotional Competencies

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has developed a framework for the skills students need to effectively manage daily challenges. Their framework focuses on skills grouped under five core competencies:

Self-awareness

- identifying emotions
- accurate self-perception
- recognizing strengths
- self-confidence
- self-efficacy

Social awareness

- perspective-taking
- empathy
- appreciating differences
- respect for others

Responsible decision making

- identifying problems
- analyzing situations
- solving problems
- evaluating
- reflecting
- ethical responsibility

Self-management

- impulse control
- stress management
- self-discipline
- self-motivation
- goal-setting
- organizational skills

Relationship skills

- communication
- social engagement
- relationship-building
- teamwork

For strategies practical to promote self-assessment and reflection in students, see the Supporting Students' Independent Learning with Self-Assessment Strategies infographic (REL West, 2021).

Table 7. Everyday strategies for teachers to foster student engagement

Strategy	Why?	What does this look like?
Acknowledge each student as they enter your classroom	Noticing each student every day helps students feel connected to school and shows that someone cares. Greeting students at the beginning of each day or class with a simple question or positive comment lets students know they are valued in the school.	• "Hi [student name]. It's good to see you." • "How was your weekend?" • "How is your project coming along?"
Praise students' effort and process	Emphasize the role of students' effort and persistence in feedback on their work. This will reinforce that students have the ability to improve in a subject through work and that ability is not a fixed trait.	• "I like the way you approached this problem. Can you tell me about what you did?" • "I see that you worked hard on this assignment." • "Your response is very creative. Can you explain your thinking?"
Help students set goals and monitor progress toward the goals	Having students set ambitious, yet achievable, goals and marking progress toward those goals helps students develop strategies for self-management. Goal-setting also develops students' belief in their capacity to reach a goal through hard work.	• "What is a goal you want to achieve this week?" • "What do you think is the biggest obstacle to achieving this goal?" • "How can you overcome that obstacle?"
Use a student-centered approach to classroom discipline	At the beginning of the school year, establish clear expectations for student behavior in collaboration with students. When a student misbehaves, ask the student to reflect on the reasons for the behavior and strategies that could have led to better decisions.	• "What kind of classroom norms do we need so that every student has an opportunity to share ideas?" • "How do you think your behavior made your classmates feel?" • "What other strategies could you have used in this situation?"

Table 8. Sample Role-Playing Activity for Conflict Management Skills

The instructor leads the class in a role-playing exercise in which students work in pairs to demonstrate appropriate and inappropriate ways to manage conflict.

The instructor divides the class into pairs. Student A is told to borrow an object from student B. Student B should then imagine that some time has passed and student A has failed to return the borrowed object. Student B then role-plays trying to get the object back in two ways: (1) in an out-of-control manner, using an aggressive attitude or action, and (2) an in-control manner, using a positive attitude or action.

Once the students have role-played both scenarios, the instructor should generate a discussion with students on the differences between the two ways in which they attempted to get their object back. The goal of the discussion is for students to realize that there is a positive way to manage conflict, and that this can often yield better results. During the discussion, the instructor should try to highlight skills such as stress management, self-control, social values, dealing with anger or hostility, and peer group behaviors. Examples of discussion prompts:

- If this situation occurred outside of school, how many of you would initially react in an out-of-control manner?
- How might you react differently in school?
- What are some of the skills needed to be able to react in an in-control manner?
- What are some of the benefits of acting in an in-control manner in this situation and in situations like this?

Strategy 3

Regularly assess student engagement to identify areas for improvement, and target interventions to students who are not meaningfully engaged.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision) Standard 2 (Instructional Leadership); Standard 4 (Climate); Standard 8 (Staff Development)

Schools should conduct annual school climate and student engagement surveys to support student success. These surveys can provide valuable insight into students' experiences and perceptions, complementing early warning indicators like attendance and grades. These data sources help staff identify underlying issues, such as why students may have low attendance or declining academic performance (for more information, access the Shifting the Current School Climate infographic [REL Northwest, 2018]). For example, survey results might reveal that students lack trust between themselves and teachers or perceive low expectations for their postsecondary success, shedding light on reasons for disengagement.

When selecting a survey tool, prioritize options that are valid and reliable. Ensure the survey aligns with the school's goals for student engagement and incorporates factors research has linked to positive student outcomes. Use the data to identify strengths and areas for improvement (see Survey Says School Climate Data Can Drive School Improvement [REL Mid-Atlantic, 2019]) at both the schoolwide and subgroup levels. For example, if incoming ninth-graders report struggling with peer relationships or low teacher trust, consider implementing peer mentoring programs or interpersonal skills building initiatives. If students express that coursework feels disconnected from their future goals, focus on integrating curriculum that ties academic skills to college and career opportunities. This approach ensures data-driven strategies to enhance student engagement and achievement.

Example

At the beginning of the school year, a high school administers a school climate and student engagement survey to all students. The survey measures trust between students and teachers, students' sense of belonging, perceptions of academic rigor, and the relevance of coursework to future goals. The results show that ninth-grade students have lower levels of trust in teachers and feel disconnected from their coursework. Attendance records also confirm that ninth-graders have higher absenteeism compared to other grades. Based on the data, the school implements a two-part plan:

1. **Building Relationships**: The school launches a peer mentoring program, pairing ninth-grade students with trained 11th grade and 12th grade student mentors who meet weekly to discuss goals, challenges, and behavioral and interpersonal skills. Teachers also participate in professional development to improve student-teacher relationships through consistent communication and positive feedback.
2. **Connecting Coursework to the Future:** A team of teachers collaborates to redesign ninth-grade lessons, incorporating real-world projects tied to career paths.

Throughout the year, the school tracks changes in attendance, grades, and survey responses. By mid-year, ninth-grade students report feeling more supported and engaged, attendance improves, and teachers note increased participation and effort in class. The school uses this data to refine and sustain its initiatives for future cohorts.

The following table provides sample engagement survey questions from the Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools Practice Guide (Rumberger et al., 2017).

Table 9. Sample student engagement survey questions

Questions/Statements	What is Being Measured
How much do you agree with the following statements? • I usually look forward to this class. • I work hard to do my best in this class. • Sometimes I get so interested in my work I don't want to stop. • The topics we are studying are interesting and challenging.	Academic Engagement
How much do you agree with the following statements? • When my teachers tell me not to do something, I know they have a good reason. • I feel safe and comfortable with teachers at this school. • My teachers always keep their promises. • My teachers will always listen to students' ideas. • My teachers treat me with respect.	Student-Teacher Trust
How much do you agree with the following statements? • My classes give me useful preparation for what I plan to do in life. • High school teaches me valuable skills. • Working hard in high school matters for success in the workforce. • What we learn in class is necessary for success in the future. • I have someone who is helping me with my college and career goals.	Importance of School for the Future

Potential Roadblock 1

Teachers are focused on traditional academics and resistant to integrating non-academic skills or a career curriculum.

Suggested Approach. Schools should provide teachers with the reasons for including non-academic skills in their teaching to ensure teachers fully understand why these skills are important and how they support academic growth. It is helpful for schools to provide examples to teachers of how non-academic skills can be integrated into traditional academics. Schools can partner with industry experts to support teachers' use of a career curriculum. Schools can create an industry advisory board that helps with lesson planning, hosts job site visits, or offers feedback on student work. Providing teachers with professional development and time to collaborate across subjects ensures lessons align with state standards while integrating career themes. Emphasizing that a career focus can engage students and using existing resources for integrated lessons can further ease the transition. Districts can assist by fostering collaboration between career and academic staff and offering schools flexibility in curriculum choices.

Potential Roadblock 2

"We do not have enough staff to deliver a program focused on building students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school."

Suggested Approach. Schools with limited staff can still help students build the non-academic skills needed to manage challenges by integrating these lessons into the regular curriculum. Teachers can model skills, use structured group work, and provide explicit instruction on decision making and problem solving within their existing subjects. Districts and states can support this approach by adopting non-academic skill standards, offering sample lesson plans, and providing professional development for teachers.

For students needing extra support, schools can implement a peer mentoring program integrated into the school day. Peer mentors can be trained and overseen through a credit-bearing leadership course, with one class per week dedicated to mentoring sessions using an established curriculum. This approach ensures non-academic skill instruction and mentorship are part of students' daily routines without requiring additional staff.

Potential Roadblock 3

"We do not have enough time during the day for students to practice problem solving or anger management skills."

Suggested Approach. Schools can address time constraints for teaching problem solving and anger management skills by leveraging natural opportunities throughout the school day. Train all staff, including support staff, to recognize moments where students can apply these skills. This approach integrates skill practice into daily interactions, making it part of the school culture without requiring additional time in the schedule.

Additional Resources

WWC Intervention Report: Career Academies (What Works Clearinghouse, 2015):
What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) identified one study of career academies that falls within the scope of the Dropout Prevention topic area and meets WWC group design standards without reservations. The study included between 1,379 and 1,454 students (depending on outcome) who applied to an academy before their ninth grade or 10th grade years. The WWC considers the extent of evidence for career academies on the educational attainment of high-school aged youth to be small for three outcome domains—completing school, staying in school, and progressing in school.

College and workforce outcomes for Indiana and Minnesota students who concentrate in career and technical education (REL Midwest, 2021):
These infographics highlight key findings from a REL Midwest study that examined whether high school graduates in Indiana and Minnesota who completed a large number of career and technical education courses in a single career-oriented program of study (concentrators) had different college and workforce outcomes from graduates who completed fewer (samplers) or no career and technical education courses (non-participants).

Facilitating Postsecondary Success: Strategies to Remove Service Roadblocks for Students with Disabilities (REL Mid-Atlantic, 2024):
Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) include a secondary transition section to help students with disabilities prepare for life after high school. However, navigating postsecondary pathways can be challenging for students, families, and school staff. This infographic highlights these challenges and provides five key strategies to support smoother transitions to college, careers, and community participation.

Measuring Career Readiness in High School Literature Scan (Warner et al., 2019):
REL Appalachia explores how to define and assess career readiness for high school students. It reviews multiple frameworks that identify key competencies, including academic knowledge, technical skills, and employability traits such as problem solving and communication. The report also examines various assessment tools and strategies to measure career readiness, emphasizing the importance of aligning educational programs with workforce demands.

High-Quality Advising: Building Systems for Implementing Individualized Career Plans (REL Southwest, 2024):
This infographic describes the purpose of individualized career plans, also known as ICPs, how they prepare students for the future, and the practices that schools can adopt to implement high-quality ICPs.

Career and Technical Education Credentials in Virginia High Schools: Trends in Attainment and College Enrollment Outcomes (Harris et al., 2021):
In 2013, the Virginia legislature added a CTE credential requirement to the Standard diploma for students who entered ninth grade for the first time in 2013 or later. The policy focuses on Standard diploma graduates, who are less likely to enroll in, persist in, or complete college than graduates who earn Virginia's other main diploma, the Advanced Studies diploma. At Virginia CTE leaders' request, REL Appalachia conducted a descriptive study of attainment rates of CTE credentials, completion rates of CTE programs of study, and college enrollment rates from 2011 to 2017, the years before and after the policy change.

Four Pillars of Support for High School Students' College and Career Readiness (REL Appalachia, 2022):
Teachers, counselors, and school leaders play a vital role in building, assessing, and strengthening four pillars of support students need to graduate from high school with multiple options for the future. This infographic includes an overview of the four pillars as well as questions and research-based strategies for educators to assess and strengthen supports for students.

Building Bridges to College and Career - Supporting Self-Efficacy: Training Materials (Park & Biagas, 2019):
These training materials from REL Appalachia include a PowerPoint presentation and handouts with tools and resources on nonacademic strategies to support students' postsecondary transitions. The materials also describe research on the link between social-emotional skills and students' successful postsecondary transitions, and they provide evidence-based strategies to help students develop self-efficacy, a skill associated with students' successful transitions. These materials were originally presented at the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) Peer Group Conference to VCCS career coaches who work in high schools to support students' postsecondary transitions.

Building Bridges to College and Career: Social Emotional Preparation (Campbell et al., 2019):
REL Appalachia shared tools and resources on preparing students with social emotional skills for successful postsecondary transitions. The session provided research-based strategies for building school culture, growth mindset, and self-efficacy for all educators including teachers, principals, school counselors, leaders from schools and school districts, university college and career readiness. counselors, and career and technical education (CTE) staff.

Exploring How Social and Emotional (SEL) Competencies Influence College and Career Readiness in the REL Pacific Region (REL Pacific, 2018):
REL Pacific stakeholders were interested in learning how social and emotional learning competencies impact students' academic success and college readiness. Through coaching, trainings, and research, REL Pacific and its partnerships examined intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies that may be related to student success.

Supporting Students' Independent Learning with Self-Assessment Strategies (REL West, 2021):
When teachers explicitly teach students the strategies of self-assessment, they become better at independently using those skills. This infographic provides sample questions teachers can use with K–8 students to support their reflection on their learning as they read, write, and problem solve.

Shifting the Current School Climate (REL Northwest, 2018):
A positive school climate promotes belonging, which is the foundation for holistic well-being. When people in a school treat one another with respect and cultivate a welcoming physical and emotional space, students are more likely to feel like they belong. This sets them up for improving behavioral and interpersonal skills as well as academic success. The infographic describes both schoolwide and classroom-level actions that adults can take to foster a positive environment.

Survey Says School Climate Data Can Drive School Improvement (REL Mid-Atlantic, 2024):
This REL infographic discusses why school climate is important and how school climate can be measured.

Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools

Recommendation 1

Monitor the progress of all students, and proactively intervene when students show early signs of attendance, behavior, or academic problems.

Recommendation 2

Provide intensive, individualized support to students who have fallen off track and face significant challenges to success.

Recommendation 3

Engage students by offering curricula and programs that connect schoolwork with college and career success and that improve students' capacity to manage challenges in and out of school.

Recommendation 4

For schools with many at-risk students, create small, personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support.

This recommendation is one of four described in the Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools Practice Guide (Rumberger et al., 2017). Although each recommendation can be implemented independently, dropout prevention experts believe the recommendations will be most effective when implemented together as part of a cohesive approach.

Recommendation 4

For schools with many at-risk students, create small, personalized communities to facilitate monitoring and support.

Creating smaller learning communities within schools can help improve student engagement, promote college and career readiness, and address the needs of students at risk of dropping out. This approach requires careful planning, typically over a year, with input and commitment from key stakeholders such as families, staff, and school leadership. This strategy is primarily recommended for schools with large populations of at-risk students due to the additional resources needed.

The goal is to create a supportive and personalized learning environment where teams of teachers build strong, meaningful connections with their students. While small community size alone is not enough to reduce dropout rates, fostering personal relationships and support is crucial. Schools can implement this practice by creating small communities within larger schools or establishing small schools at the district level.

Strategy 1

Decide whether the small communities will serve a single grade or multiple grades.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 4 (Climate)

When creating small learning communities, schools should decide whether these communities will serve single or multiple grade levels by analyzing school data to identify patterns among at-risk students. If the data show that students struggle during transition years, such as sixth or ninth grades, single-grade transition academies may be beneficial. These academies focus on helping students adjust to new expectations, increased freedom, and the challenges of middle or high school. Alternatively, if trends show increasing struggles in later grades, schools might consider forming multi-grade communities focused on college or career preparation, such as career-oriented groups for students in 10th–12th grades. Another option is to create communities that span all grades, fostering strong, long-term peer relationships from entry to graduation. Schools should tailor their approach based on the specific needs highlighted by their data.

Example

Mrs. Rickard is the principal at Central High School. Central serves 2,000 students and a large portion of students are not on track for graduation. She decided to create smaller communities within the school to make it easier to monitor and provide proactive interventions (Recommendation 1), to provide adult advocacy and case management for students who were already off track (Recommendation 2), and to integrate stronger social skills and community-oriented programming (Recommendation 3).

Looking at the school data, Mrs. Rickard realized that the freshman rates of absences and course failures were troublesome. She decided to create Freshman Academies for all freshmen, dividing the entire class into five academies, with 100–120 students per academy. Mrs. Rickard also realized that students in 10th–12th grades were struggling. Struggling students in these grades have often shared with her and the school counselor that they did not see a reason for continuing in high school. The principal decided the school needed to do something to help these students connect their education with something more meaningful, like a specific career path (e.g., work in health services, informational technology, or the hospitality industry) or interest area (e.g., science and technology). After gauging her students' and teachers' level of interest in the small communities and finding that some preferred and flourished in the traditional school structure, Mrs. Rickard decided to make academy participation voluntary. She created four multi-year 10th–12th grade academies, with approximately 300 students each, in addition to her five freshman academies. Since the rest of the 10th–12th grade students would remain as a typical school structure, students, families, and teachers could opt in to a 10th–12th grade academy if they wanted to join one of these smaller communities. To ease implementation, Mrs. Rickard decided to roll out the freshman academies the following year and the academies for 10th–12th grades in two years.

Strategy 2

Create teams of teachers that share common groups of students.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate)

To support small learning communities, schools should create teacher teams that work with the same group of students throughout the students' time in the community, whether for a single year or multiple years. For example, teachers in a 10th–12th grade career academy should ideally stay with their students for all three years to build stronger, lasting relationships and provide continuity, even during staff turnover. This approach helps teachers personally know their students, making it easier to provide support, monitor progress, and proactively intervene with at-risk students. Teacher teams also facilitate collaboration by sharing information and responsibilities for a smaller group of students, such as tracking attendance, behavior, and course performance (ABC) data. This structure makes it easier for advocates working with higher-risk students to coordinate with teachers. Schools should distribute teaching talent and access to advanced or elective courses fairly across all communities so that every group benefits from high-quality instruction and opportunities.

Schools must determine how to allocate resources and administrative leadership to support these communities. Communities can either operate as self-contained units with their own resources and leadership or share these with the larger school. Teacher leaders can serve as intermediaries between the small community and school administration to streamline communication and coordination.

Example

Mrs. Rickard created five teams of freshman academy teachers and four teams of 10th–12th grade teachers for the multi-year academies. Each team included teachers to cover each of the core courses (i.e., English language arts, social studies, math, and science). The 10th–12th grade teams also included a career technical education (CTE) teacher. The teacher teams were tasked with not only teaching the students in their academy, but also monitoring their progress and supporting them as needed.

Mrs. Rickard provided the academies with additional flexibility over scheduling and funds for field trips. This flexibility allowed each academy to modify their schedule to integrate the academy theme into core course instruction and facilitate team teaching. For example, academies could combine classes like English language arts and social studies into an integrated humanities block, or adjust their schedule to allow students to engage in real-world, multiweek projects.

To help her coordinate activities across all nine academies, Mrs. Rickard reorganized staff responsibilities so that the freshman academy program and the 10th–12th grade academy program were each overseen by a teacher leader. Teacher leaders worked with teacher teams to help with managing resources, monitoring student progress, and coordinating student supports.

Strategy 3

Identify a theme to help build a strong sense of identity and community and to improve student engagement.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate), Standard 5 (School/Community Relations)

To build a strong sense of identity and improve student engagement, schools should select a theme for each small community. A theme provides students with a shared sense of belonging and connection to their school while creating opportunities for innovative teaching that links classroom learning to real-world applications. Themes can be centered around specific topics, career paths, or interests, such as STEM, the arts, or community service.

Sample Themes:

Broad academic themes

- Humanities
- Science and technology
- Society and culture

Specific topics

- Performing arts
- Environmental studies
- Civic engagement

Career-related topics

- Communications and media
- Health
- Public safety

To foster engagement with the selected theme, schools should plan related activities, such as guest speakers, field trips, or service projects. Choosing the theme should involve input from all stakeholders, including students, families, and teachers. Schools can use surveys or meetings to gather ideas and identify popular themes. An interdisciplinary team of teachers can then select a final theme for each community. Themes do not need to be permanent; schools can adjust them over time based on changing student interests.

Example

To begin choosing themes, Mrs. Rickard informally discussed the idea with her staff to gauge their interest in themed academies. She provided examples of themes other schools had generated. From these conversations, she helped the group generate an initial list of themes. The initial list of more than 20 themes was used in a survey of families, students, and school personnel. By surveying the school community, she narrowed the list of possible themes to eight. Mrs. Rickard then met with potential teacher leaders from multiple disciplines. Together they chose themes for each community from those with the highest votes that they felt would interest students, families, and teachers. They chose (1) policing and public service, (2) medical and health-related careers, (3) visual and performing arts, and (4) science and technology careers. The themes were shared with all incoming students in 10th–12th grade. Students were asked to apply to their top three choices. Mrs. Rickard considered student preferences and student characteristics to assign them to academies. She sought to match students with themes they were interested in while also creating a mix of students in each community that reflected the demographics of the larger school. This ensured students were able to interact with a broad range of their peers in the small communities. Art teachers worked with students in each community to develop a logo to represent their theme. These logos were used to identify the community in school publications and to create community t-shirts. Students were asked to wear their t-shirt every Friday to promote their community. The teachers in each community planned projects, speakers, and field trips related to the theme of their community. For example, students in the medical and health academy took courses in CPR/AED training, anatomy and physiology, and health skills. They also shadowed healthcare workers in hospitals and local medical centers. Similarly, students in the visual and performing arts academy took courses in drama, vocal performance, and instrumental music in addition to their core courses. They also participated in choirs and orchestras, performed at local community events, and visited local performing arts centers.

Strategy 4

Develop a schedule that provides common planning time and ample opportunities for staff to monitor and support students.

SC Principal Standards: PADEPP Standard 1 (Vision), Standard 3 (Effective Management), Standard 4 (Climate)

Schools should develop a schedule that keeps teachers and students within their small community for the majority of the day. Teachers should teach most of their classes within the community, and students should primarily take courses from teachers in their assigned group. This structure allows for consistent interactions and helps build relationships.

Additionally, the schedule should include common planning time for teacher teams. This time can be built into the school day through shared periods, a weekly late start or early release, or designated blocks when students are engaged in other activities. During these planning times, teachers can collaborate to create theme-related activities, align course content with the community theme, address student concerns, and discuss academic or behavioral progress with students and families. Common planning time ensures teacher teams have the opportunity to work together to support and engage their students effectively.

Example

Mrs. Rickard realized that, with the old schedule, teachers were so busy teaching six classes a day, class after class, that they didn't have time to work together or to get to know their students. Teachers and students needed a new schedule that would allow them to remain together for most, if not all, of their day. She wanted her teacher teams to be able to fully focus on the community and not be torn between their small community and other school responsibilities. Mrs. Rickard also wanted the teacher teams to have sufficient time to develop integrated lessons and activities that would enhance the theme of their communities and enable them to get to know their students, what they were struggling with, and ways to address those concerns. She worked with her administrators to create a schedule that allowed teacher teams three hours of shared common planning time every Wednesday afternoon. She specifically chose a day during the middle of the week to discourage absences that might occur on shortened days so close to the weekend (i.e., Monday or Friday). Mrs. Rickard also instituted specific tasks for teachers to accomplish during this time to ensure the time was used well. During this common planning time, teams were asked to (1) debrief the previous week, including what worked well and what didn't, (2) discuss student progress and any problems that needed to be addressed, and (3) develop interdisciplinary lessons and activities for the following week that would support the communities. Mrs. Rickard also worked with her teacher teams to find a time each week for the small communities to work on a theme-related project/activity or to attend a community event or host a speaker related to their theme.

Potential Roadblock 1

It takes too much time, effort, and resources to create these small communities.

Suggested Approach. To make the effort worthwhile, focus on implementing this strategy in schools with many at-risk students, as these students stand to benefit the most. While the process can be resource-intensive, research shows that small communities can improve student outcomes, including staying in school, progressing academically, and graduating.

Potential Roadblock 2

Some teachers and families feel that the smaller learning communities will not provide the broad range of peer experiences that contribute to learning and may lead to sorting students by academic achievement or motivation.

Suggested Approach. Schools must establish clear, transparent selection criteria and assignment processes to ensure students aren't limited to interacting only with peers of similar backgrounds or interests. For example, they can prioritize enrolling similar numbers of at-risk students in each community and use a lottery system to fill the remaining spots, creating communities that reflect the school's overall demographics.

If selection criteria are not feasible, schools can promote a broad range of peer experiences in other ways. For instance, students can take core or themed classes within their community while attending other classes with the broader school population. Partnering with other schools to offer shared classes or extracurricular activities can further enhance opportunities for these interactions.

Potential Roadblock 3

Some families and students may not feel enthusiastic about the themes of their assigned small community.

Suggested Approach. Schools should involve teachers, families, and students in selecting themes from the start. Once themes are identified, ensure families have detailed information about each option so they can make informed decisions. Encourage students to reflect on their interests, skills, and career goals before selecting a theme, using tools like self-assessments from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Recognize that students' interests may evolve over time. Schools can offer "open enrollment" periods to allow students to switch communities, provided it does not significantly affect graduation requirements. Schools should remain flexible and adapt themes annually if there are widespread changes in student interests.

Potential Roadblock 4

Teachers worry that teaching within a small community will require them to teach subjects outside their expertise.

Suggested Approach. While teachers may need to teach multiple courses within their subject area (e.g., introductory and advanced levels of the same subject), it is unlikely they will be asked to teach outside their credentials, as this could violate state regulations. Teachers may face more course preparation than before, but this burden can be eased by sharing curricular materials from colleagues who have taught those courses. Schools can also implement block scheduling, which reduces the number of daily class preparations, helping to balance the workload.

Potential Roadblock 5

"We need solutions to help students now, rather than waiting a year to establish a small community."

Suggested Approach. Begin implementing key strategies of small communities right away to provide immediate support. For example, adopt alternative or block scheduling to reduce the number of students each teacher is responsible for and/or introduce a teacher advisory program where teachers mentor a small group of students over multiple years. These measures can help build stronger teacher-student relationships and provide some benefits of small communities while the full approach is being developed.

Additional Resource

The Parlier Attendance Materials (Regional Educational Laboratory West, 2019) use a multi-tiered approach for boosting attendance, including tier 1 materials that communicate key messages about the importance of daily attendance. The suite of materials includes an infographic, a community billboard, and a checklist for helping families.

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