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 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.
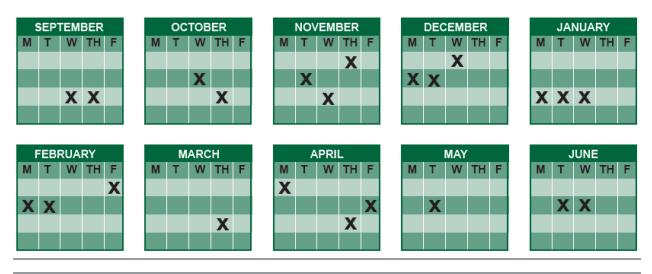
Figure 2. Sample banner on attendance levels

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, 2025b) 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, 2025a).

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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