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 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, 2025a) 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, 2025b).

References

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