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Early Warning Indicator Systems

By Molly Ryan July 2011

Overview

Boosting high school graduation rates is a growing concern to educators and policymakers. Researchers stress that, although graduation rates have varied little in recent years, "[w]hat makes current graduation rates alarming is a reality of the new U.S. economy: It is practically impossible for individuals lacking a high school diploma to earn a living or participate meaningfully in civic life."

Research shows that students who fail to graduate high school exhibit clear signs of dropping out.² Warning signs such as irregular attendance, poor academic performance, behavior problems and grade retention are more precise predictors of whether a student will ultimately drop out than are social and economic indicators such as family income and parental involvement.³

States have made notable progress collecting longitudinal information

that follows individual students over time. Access to such student data has prompted state and school district officials across the country to develop "early warning indicator systems" to

efficiently identify students who are at risk of dropping out and provide targeted supports to get them back on track and graduate. The following summaries highlight the statewide early warning indicator systems in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Alabama and the Philadelphia Public Schools district-wide system.

State Examples

Louisiana

In 2007, the Louisiana Department of Education (DOE) launched the Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS) to identify students in grades 8-12 who exhibit characteristics of dropping out before graduation. To develop DEWS, the DOE partnered with a regional educational software vendor and state university researchers, who established trigger points for four early-warning indicators: student attendance, behavior, achievement and age. Students may be classified as at-risk if:

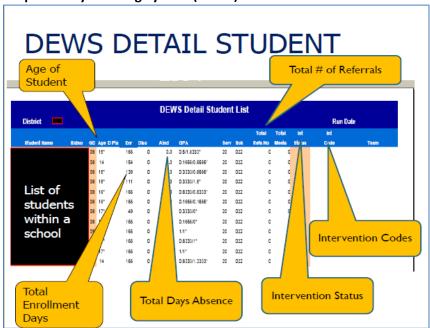
- The student is absent more than 10% of the total days enrolled
- The student has received discipline referrals for 7% or more of the total days enrolled
- The student's grade point average (GPA) is less than or equal to 1.0
- The student's GPA declined 1.5 points from the last grading period
- The student is overage for grade. 4

High school dropouts, as compared to graduates, typically:

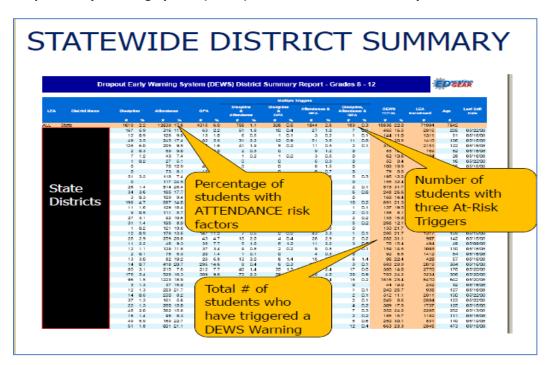
- Make less money
- Rely more heavily on government subsidies
- Have a considerably greater chance of being incarcerated
- Are in poorer health
- Have shorter life expectancies
- Contribute much less in taxes.

DEWS provides school leaders with detailed student-level data as well as district-and school-level data twice a month. Once a student is identified as at-risk, appropriate intervention is provided. Although local school districts are not required to implement DEWS, over two-thirds of the state's districts currently use the system. The DOE intends to establish DEWS in middle and elementary schools in the near future.

Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS) Student Detail⁷



Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS) Statewide District Summary⁸



South Carolina

In the 2009-10 school year, South Carolina piloted **The Student Potential Performance Snapshot (SPPS)**, a statewide data reporting system designed to provide "specific objective criteria for districts to use in the identification of students at risk for being poorly prepared for the next level of study or for dropping out of school." ⁹

The system generates a "snapshot" for each student in grades 8-12, consisting of information on student attendance, behavior and course performance. The SPPS flags students with the following at-risk characteristics:

- Scoring "below basic" on state assessments
- Earning: below five credits for 9th grade, below 11 credits for 10th grade or below 17 credits for 11th grade
- Being two or more years older than average for a grade
- Being suspended or expelled
- Missing more than eight days of instruction
- Not advancing to the next grade
- Being enrolled in multiple schools during the same school year
- · Being homeless
- Being a single parent
- Living with a parent who is a "displaced homemaker" seeing a job in the workforce "due to death, divorce
 or abandonment" 10
- Failing 9th-grade math or English. 11

After a student is identified as at-risk, certified school counseling staff determine proper interventions for the student. Reports produced by the SPPS can be aggregated at the school, district and state levels. The South Carolina Department of Education is currently completing the piloting stage of the SPPS in anticipation of statewide system implementation. ¹²

The Student Potential Performance Snapshot (SPPS), School View¹³

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Alabama

In the 2009-10 academic year, the Alabama Department of Education launched the Alabama Graduation Tracking System (AGTS). The AGTS was established by Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University and the Center for Social Organization of Schools, in partnership with the Baldwin County School System (a southern Alabama district with over 28,000 students). The system is relatively unique in that it provides data on students from kindergarten to 12th grade; few early warning indicator systems have this capacity. 14

The AGTS captures student data pertaining to attendance, behavior and course performance as "high yield" indicators. School districts may incorporate other indicators into the system as necessary. 15 The AGTS is designed to identify students who:

- Are absent for more than 10% of instructional time
- Are suspended
- Fail two or more core academic courses
- Accumulate less than one-fourth of required credits. 16

Once the AGTS classifies a student as at risk of dropping out, a graduation coach designs an individualized plan to help the student stay in school.

District Example

Philadelphia Public Schools

In 2006, through the Keeping Students on Track to Graduation/Early Warning Indicators Project, the Philadelphia Public Schools (PPS) piloted an early warning system in two high-poverty middle schools. The system was based on research findings that a 6th grader with one of the following four indicators had at least a three in four chance of dropping out of high school:17

- Failing 8th-grade math
- Failing 8th-grade English
- Yearly attendance below 80%
- Receiving a final "unsatisfactory" behavior mark in at least one class. ¹⁸

The system notifies PPS teachers and administrators when a student demonstrates one of the above indicators; teacher teams meet regularly to review student data and identify appropriate interventions. In recent years, the project has expanded to high schools and additional cities. 19

¹ Ruth Curran Neild, Robert Balfanz and Liza Herzog, An Early Warning System, Educational Leadership, (2007), 1,

http://www.every1graduates.org/PDFs/Early%20Warning%20Systems.pdf (accessed April 8, 2011).

Robert Balfanz, John M. Bridgeland, Laura A. Moore and Joanna Hornig Fox, Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic (America's Promise Alliance, Civic Enterprises, and the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University: 2010), 44, http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/~/media/Files/Our%20Work /Grad%20Nation/Building%20a%20Grad%20Nation/Building%20a%20Grad%20Nation FullReport FINAL%2011-30-10.ashx (accessed April 11, 2011). ³ ibid.

⁴ Louisiana Department of Education, *DEWS From the Ground Up* (Data Quality Campaign: 2009), 5, http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/EWI - DEWS-Presentation Webinar .pdf (accessed March 30, 2011).

Education's Next Horizon, Increasing Graduation Rates: Learning To Finish, Education's Next Horizon (Education's Next Horizon: 2011), 2, http://www.ednexthorizon.org/2011 pdf/2011 Key Issues Long Report-Increasing Graduation Rates.pdf (accessed April 8, 2011).

ibid.

http://maec.ceee.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/Dropout%20report%208.11.09.pdf (accessed April 12, 2011).

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⁷ Louisiana Department of Education, 6.

⁸ Louisiana Department of Education, 8.

⁹ S.C. Code Ann. § 59-59-150.

¹⁰ South Carolina Department of Education, *Student Potential Performance Snapshot: EEDA At-Risk Committee -IT Initiative* (Personal Pathways to Success: 2009), 28, http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/EWI - DQC SPPS Presentation.pdf (accessed April 11, 2011).

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¹² ECS Staff e-mail correspondence with Dr. John Lane, Education and Economic Development Act, South Carolina Department of Education, March 30, 2011.

¹³ South Carolina Department of Education, 32.

¹⁴ Kimberly Charis, *Alabama's Graduation Coaches* (Learning First Alliance: 2011), http://www.learningfirst.org/alabama-s-graduation-coaches (accessed April 8, 2011).

¹⁵ Alabama State Department of Education, *The Development and Implementation Guide for the Alabama Graduation Tracking System (AGTS)* (Prevention and Support Services: 2009), 2.

¹⁶ Ibid. 1-2.

¹⁷ Neild, Balfanz and Herzog, 2.

¹⁸ ibid.

¹⁹ Martha Abele Mac Iver and Douglas J. Mac Iver, *Beyond the Indicators: An Integrated School-Level Approach to Dropout Prevention*, Mid-Atlantic Equity Center (Arlington, VA: 2009), 18,