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Dropout Prevention: National and Vermont Programs

Vermont currently is at a ten year low in dropout rates.¹ Nationwide, Vermont ranked 7th in 2001 with a 7% dropout rate for 16-19 year-olds.² However there is some disparity within Vermont. Harwood, Colchester, and Arlington all reported almost complete graduation for the class of 2003, while the schools of Burlington, Bellows Falls, Milton, and Mt. Anthony all have completion rates of 80% or lower.³

One facet of dropout prevention programs that must be addressed prior to specifics is the issue of student tracking, which establishes the numbers behind dropout rates. Vermont's current system works by taking the number of students graduating and dividing it by the number of dropouts over the four year period. This system is imprecise because it fails to take into account students that transfer or come back to the original school the following year.⁴ A national institute that focuses on dropout prevention warns that inadequate student tracking may be the primary obstacle in catalyzing community response and dropout prevention efforts.⁵

Another troublesome part of dropout prevention is the lack of rigorous evaluations of drop-out prevention programs and the rarity of programs having repeat success. A report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) concluded "that what works in dropout prevention is unknown."⁶ The report also said that although there have been some exemplary programs across the country, there has been little successful program replication. There have been a variety of

¹Vermont Department of Education, "Vermont Public School and High School Completion Rate" http://www.state.vt.us/educ/new/pdfdoc/data/dropout/dropout_completion_03.pdf, Web site visited on 02-03-05

² Kids Count Online Data Book 2004, "Percentage of teens who are high school dropouts (Ages 16-19) for 2001," <http://www.aecf.org/cgi-bin/kc.cgi?action=ranking&variable=hsd&year=2001>, Web site visited on 02-03-05

³ Vermont Department of Education, "Vermont Public School and High School Completion Rate"

⁴ Vermont Department of Education, "Vermont Public School and High School Completion Rate"

⁵Montecel, Josie Cortez, Albert Cortez "Dropout-Prevention Programs: Right Intent, Wrong Focus, and Some Suggestions on Where to Go", *Education and Urban Society*, Vol 36 No 2., February 2004 169-188 <http://eus.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/36/2/169>, Web site visited on 2-08-05

⁶ US General Accounting Office, "School Dropouts: Education could play a stronger role in identifying and disseminating promising prevention strategies," <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02240.pdf>, Web site visited on 3-08-05

dropout-prevention programs, but “their effectiveness is unknown because they still have not been rigorously evaluated.”⁷

Vermont Programs

In 2001 the Vermont State Education Board saw a need for high school truancy and dropout prevention programs. The Vermont Consortium for Successful High School Completion (VCSHSC) was created by State Education Board to respond to this problem. The VCSHSC has been working since 2002 in partnerships with school districts in Vermont to develop the high school drop-out prevention pilot programs with the following mission: “1) identifying the conditions underlying local truancy and dropout problems; 2) developing a strategic plan to address those conditions; and 3) guiding the implementation of the plan.”⁸ Some details of the programs are as follows.

Lamoille High School started a program targeting students who drop out because of employment reasons. The program is engaged in a partnership with Vermont Jobs Corps that drove dropout rates down to 8.5% for the 2002-2003 school year, compared to a rate of approximately 25% for several years prior. In addition, 10 previous dropouts returned to school through “new articulation agreements.”⁹

Brattleboro High School has taken a three-pronged approach. For the educational curriculum, Brattleboro has hired a coordinator to “develop community based learning opportunities for students with a record of truancy, suspension, expulsion, etc.”. A community team made up of students and adults has focused on increasing awareness of how harassment, violence, and racial tensions are impacting the youth in the community. Finally, the United Way of Windham and the Alliance for Building Community (ABC) are promoting the Windham County Youth Initiative, which has focused on affordable housing for youth as a priority.¹⁰

Enosburg Falls Middle High School Identified priorities as being: increased flexibility for students who have had academic or social difficulties and need a fresh start, more academic options for all students, and increased efforts to make students feel secure and accepted by both peers and adults in school.¹¹

⁷ Montecel et al “Dropout-Prevention Programs: Right Intent, Wrong Focus, and Some Suggestions on Where to Go”

⁸ Vermont Department of Education, “Programs and Services: Truancy and Dropout Prevention,” http://www.state.vt.us/educ/new/html/pgm_truancy.html, Web site visited on 2-03-05

⁹ Vermont Department of Education, “Pilot Project Profile: Lamoille North Supervisory Union,” http://www.state.vt.us/educ/new/pdfdoc/pgm_truancy/profiles/consortium_lamoille_north.pdf, site visited on 2-03-05

¹⁰ Vermont Department of Education, “Pilot Project Profile: Brattleboro Union High School,” http://www.state.vt.us/educ/new/pdfdoc/pgm_truancy/profiles/consortium_brattleboro.pdf, site visited on 02-03-05

¹¹ Vermont Department of Education, “Pilot Project Profile: Enosburg Middle High School,” http://www.state.vt.us/educ/new/pdfdoc/pgm_truancy/profiles/consortium_enosburg.pdf, site visited on 02-03-05

Mount Anthony/Bennington The pilot program has so far developed committees in the areas it has deemed essential: evaluation, communication, mentoring, academic environment, and curriculum. A summer program for troubled freshmen has also been established called “Bridges”.¹²

In **Whitingham** for the last two years there has been a student-driven program called DOT.COM (Drop out and Truancy Committee). The students have been involved in leadership programs, and have made presentations to the school and at the New England Middle School Educators conference.¹³

Examples of Programs in Other States

Achieving a College Education (ACE) is a nationally recognized program targeting students who traditionally would not consider going to college. The ACE program began at South Mountain Community College (SMCC) in Arizona in 1987. Since then, 250 high school students have participated in the program’s summer institute each year. The program works by targeting those most likely to drop-out of school. The program provides an opportunity for high school juniors and seniors who are at risk of not graduating from Phoenix Union High School District and from Tempe Union High School District to take college courses while attending high school. The purpose of the program is to provide a strong foundation so that the students will succeed in graduating from high school. During this two-year program, students attend SMCC during the regular summer sessions and every Saturday during the fall and the spring semesters. Program eligibility requires that students be the first in their family to attend college, have evidence of economic hardship, are a member of an underrepresented group, and have environmental challenges (personal, single parent, etc.). Preliminary evaluation information is promising. SMCC provides the funding for the program’s cost, which averages about \$1,250 per participant.¹⁴

The "Successful Students' Partnership" established by the Pennsylvania Department of Education granted more than \$463,000 to 13 school districts for the 2004-05 school year as an attempt to prevent dropouts. Grantees can develop and implement various strategies to address each specific district’s needs. The purpose is to use the available resources to minimize dropouts and improve academic achievement. Districts that have a dropout rate higher than 2.2% are eligible

¹² Vermont Department of Education, “Pilot Project Profile: Mt Anthony Union High School (Bennington),” http://www.state.vt.us/educ/new/pdfdoc/pgm_truancy/profiles/consortium_mount_anthony.pdf, site visited on 02-03-05

¹³ Vermont Department of Education, “Pilot Project Profile: Whitingham Schools,” http://www.state.vt.us/educ/new/pdfdoc/pgm_truancy/profiles/consortium_whitingham.pdf, site visited on 02-03-05

¹⁴ Montecel et al “Dropout-Prevention Programs: Right Intent, Wrong Focus, and Some Suggestions on Where to Go.”

for grants. This program aided 4,871 students in 2002-03 and has provided additional teacher aides, life skills courses, and after-school activities.¹⁵

The SUCCESS program is a school based youth services group offered by the Des Moines public school system. The program is funded by the Iowa Department of Education and community action groups. The program focuses on students with the most need as the best means to combat high school truancy. The program offers 73 after-school and summer camps with a staff of 60 human services specialists present as case managers. The program served 3,358 students in the 2002-2003 year. In the year 80% of pregnant teens engaged with the program stayed in school, compared with a national average of 30%. In all, the case managers made 3,227 home visits.¹⁶

Examples of National Programs

The Intercultural Development Research Association founded the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program in 1984. Since then, approximately 11,500 students thought to be at risk for dropout have been kept in school due to the program. The program is heralded as a “U.S. Department of Education exemplary program, validated by the Program Effectiveness Panel.”¹⁷ The program operates by using junior high students as paid tutors for elementary students. Evaluations show that students regularly feel better about themselves and schools and show steady improvement in grades and attendance.¹⁸

The Upward Bound Program is the oldest program targeting high school students founded by the Federal Education Bound (predecessor to US Department of Education).¹⁹ Upward Bound focuses on 8th grade graduates with families with income at 150% or lower of the poverty level for schooling after school and on weekends, with emphasis on a variety of fields. According to a US Department of Education evaluation, some important achievements follow: Program participants earned an average of one credit more than non-participants, which is substantial considering the expected average of 5 credits per student a year; and, student with low academic achievement expectations are helped the most, with a difference of 3.1 credits between students not expecting to attend college who participate in the program and those that don’t. The evaluation concluded that the “short term impacts ... are both impressive and important,” and that the program is “particularly beneficial for students who initially expect to complete fewer

¹⁵ Kristen Conklin “Dropout Prevention Grants Awarded to Pennsylvania”, National Governors Association http://www.nga.org/center/frontAndCenter/1,1188,C_FRONT_CENTER^D_7231,00.html 08/19/2004

¹⁶ Des Moines Public Schools, “SUCCESS program overview,” <http://www.dmeps.k12.ia.us/programs/6suoverview.htm>, site visited 02-08-05

¹⁷ Montecel et al “Dropout-Prevention Programs: Right Intent, Wrong Focus, and Some Suggestions on Where to Go”

¹⁸ Montecel et al “Dropout-Prevention Programs: Right Intent, Wrong Focus, and Some Suggestions on Where to Go”

¹⁹ Montecel et al “Dropout-Prevention Programs: Right Intent, Wrong Focus, and Some Suggestions on Where to Go”

years of education.”²⁰ Students who participate in the program for more than one year are more likely to both stay in high school and attend college.²¹

The U.S. Department of Education established a grant program in 2001 to assist schools with annual dropout rates above their state average to implement research-based, sustainable, and coordinated school dropout prevention and re-entry programs. Grants are awarded competitively and support activities such as professional development; reduction in student-teacher ratios; counseling and mentoring for at-risk students; and the implementation of comprehensive school reform models.²² All state education agencies involved must report annually to the U.S. Department of Education on the status of all activities and dropout rates for students at schools assisted by the grant program. They also must report annual school dropout rates for the two fiscal years prior to receiving funds under the grant.²³

Alternative Schools

The main purpose of alternative education is meeting each student’s specific needs. According to the Iowa Department of Education, the smaller the school size, the lower the dropout rate; thus there is a need for alternative schools to provide a means of smaller learning environments. In the state of Iowa between 1982-2004 the number of annual dropouts has declined from approximately 5,100 to 3,700 annually. In that time the number of alternative schools and programs has increased as well. Currently between nine and ten thousand students attend an alternative school in Iowa.²⁴

In Oklahoma an alternative schooling program, Students Working in Active Pursuit of Success (SWAPS), was developed through state funding and has been successful at enabling high school dropouts to attain their diploma. Through the Oklahoma Department of Education’s grant of \$150,000 the program is able to pay for 7 staff to service 75 students per year. This alternative education program has an 87% graduation rate. To gain access to this program, students must be recommended by their high schools. These students receive instruction six hours a day for four days a week. Along with the instruction students can participate in CareerTech instruction,

²⁰ US Department of Education, “The National Evaluation of Upward Bound Summary of First Year Impacts and Program Operations (1997),” <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/higher/upward3.html>, site visited on 2-08-05

²¹ Montecel et al “Dropout-Prevention Programs: Right Intent, Wrong Focus, and Some Suggestions on Where to Go”

²² School Dropout Prevention Program, United States Department of Education, <http://www.ed.gov/programs/dropout/index.html>, site visited on 2-08-05.

²³ No Child Left Behind: Sources for Funding that Support School Counseling and Mental Health Services, American Counseling Association, Office of Public Policy and Legislation, http://www.counseling.org/Content/NavigationMenu/PUBLICPOLICY/NOCHILDLEFTBEHIND/NCLB_Programs_August_2004.pdf, August 2004.

²⁴Iowa Association of Alternative Education, “Iowa Success Stories of Alternative Schools & Students” April 2004

<http://www.iaae.net/Articles/IowaSuccessStoriesofAlternativeSchoolsandStudents2004.pdf>
Web site visited 3-08-05

which offers an occupational skill that can enhance the chances of acquiring employment after graduation.²⁵

Currently states are creating legislation that supports the use of alternative schools on troubled students. Illinois has legislation pending that will appropriate funds from the general revenue fund to the state Board of Education for grants to regional offices of education. They are also trying to make it mandatory for all expelled students from grades 6-12 to be placed in an alternative school. These alternative schools offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities or behavioral problems an opportunity to achieve in a different setting. While there are many different kinds of alternative schools, they are often characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller teacher-student ratios and modified curricula. They are also trying to make it necessary for the local school board to approve the addition of any alternative school.²⁶

Mentoring

Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity focuses on academics and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies. Many mentor programs are created from within the school; however, there are exterior programs that have been proven to be extremely effective.

One model program is the Teen Outreach Program (TOP), which is designed for children between the ages of 12-19. It involves them in various community services to prevent problem behaviors, teen pregnancy, and to enhance academic achievement. During the 2001-02 school year, TOP was being used in 16 states across the U.S., reaching more than 13,000 young people. In a study conducted in 1997 in 25 sites over a five-year period it was found that TOP participants were about 40% less likely to become pregnant, be suspended from school, or fail a class.²⁷

Compiled at the request of Senator Donald Collins by Daniel Wander, Richard Hodges, and Micah Rabin, under the supervision of Professor Anthony Gierzynski on March 8, 2005.

Disclaimer: This report was been prepared by undergraduate students at the University of Vermont under the supervision of Professor Anthony Gierzynski. The material contained in this report does not reflect official policy of the University of Vermont.

²⁵ National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, "Students working to active pursuit of success", 5-21-2002, <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/scripts/search/progsearch.asp?action=display&refnum=98>, site visited 3-08-05

²⁶ National Conference of State Legislatures, "Alternative Education: Legislative Tracking," <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/AlterEdBill.htm>, site visited on 3-08-05.

²⁷ National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, "Sample Dropout Intervention Program," December 17, 2003, <http://www.ncset.org/publications/essentialtools/dropout/part3.3.11.asp>, site visited 3-08-05