



9-1-2010

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### Recommended Citation

Mac Iver, Martha Abele (2010) "Beginning with the End in Mind: The District Office Leadership Role in Closing the Graduation Gap for At-Risk Students," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 38: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1121>

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# Beginning with the End in Mind: The School District Office Leadership Role in Closing the Graduation Gap for At-Risk Students

**Martha Abele Mac Iver**

We need to begin with the end in mind as Stephen Covey (1989) reminds us. Graduating all students ready for college or career is the ultimate goal of the K-12 educational system. While this goal should be obvious to educational policymakers, current accountability frameworks have led many school districts to narrowly focus on student achievement and, hence, to miss the point entirely. Unfortunately, theirs could be viewed as a rational actor response to an accountability system that focuses more on improvements in test scores for the more numerous elementary schools in the district than on the graduation rates of its smaller number of high schools. “Achievement” has become so closely tied to test scores that educators sometimes lose perspective of the larger goal of graduating all students prepared for postsecondary training leading to a career.

Prior to addressing the question of district leadership in closing the graduation gap, it is important to emphasize the glaring need for more appropriate incentive structures focused on graduation rates within accountability systems for districts and schools. Up until recently, federal accountability measures under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) permitted states to set low graduation rate benchmarks, which effectively resulted in assessment pass rates (test scores) as the primary focus for high school accountability. Research indicates that it is critical to place graduation rates and assessment outcomes on equal footing in accountability systems (Balfanz et al. 2007). Analyses of the Texas education system suggest that accountability systems based on testing alone are pushing the lowest performing students out of high school and reducing the graduation rate for these students and their schools (McNeil et al. 2008). There are now calls to include actual cohort graduation rates in high school accountability systems (Alliance for Excellent Education 2007, 2008; Hall 2007; U.S. Department of Education 2008a), and an increasing number of states are beginning to do so (Princiotta and Reyna 2009).

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Analyses highlighting the wide “graduation gap” between students in large American cities and those in their surrounding suburbs have increasingly focused education policymakers and practitioners on ensuring that all students successfully complete high school. The gap is as large as 40 to 50 percentage points in some metropolitan areas. Graduation rates for high poverty students are well below 50% in many major cities (Swanson 2009). Closing this gap demands focused attention. Assuming that accountability structures are revised to make increased graduation rates a top priority, how will this goal be achieved? What is the role of the district office in making this happen?

Ensuring that students progress through high school to graduation by passing courses and earning credits ultimately depends on what happens in individual schools and classrooms, but a dropout prevention approach that relies primarily on decentralization and school-centered solutions ignores the reality that graduation is a systemic issue, not just a school level issue. A district level focus is essential. Graduation rates at particular high schools are largely determined by prior attendance levels and academic readiness of the entering ninth grade class. Schools with “extreme degrees of difficulty,” where upwards of 80% of students enter behind grade level and have significant attendance or behavior problems, face great difficulty in bringing those students to graduation (Neild and Balfanz 2006a). Eighth-grade attendance has been shown to be much more important as a predictor of high school graduation than some dropout prevention and intervention efforts that begin in ninth grade (Mac Iver 2009). Student experiences and outcomes prior to high school cannot be ignored in addressing how to increase graduation rates, and individual high schools simply cannot address these issues on their own.

Elementary and middle schools are not typically judged on ultimate graduation outcomes, but these schools can exert a significant influence on the district’s graduation rate and those of particular high schools. High school attendance problems that influence dropout rates typically begin during the middle grades. Even middle grades schools with a relatively high daily attendance rate can have a significant number of students who are chronically absent (Chang and Romero 2008; Balfanz, Durham, and Plank 2008). These students can slip through the cracks without affecting the school’s accountability measures, and so middle schools do not always have an incentive to intervene. Elementary and middle schools also contribute to the dropout problem through the practice of retaining students in grade. Accountability systems can actually create incentives for schools to retain students in order to improve test scores. Students who are overage for grade because of retention are more likely to drop out of high school, even controlling for attendance, course performance, and prior test scores (Mac Iver and Messel 2011).

Public high schools usually have little control over the preparation students receive prior to entry although some, like magnet schools, have the ability to select only high performing students and to transfer students to other schools when they exhibit behavioral problems like absenteeism, discipline, or academic failure. These selective schools are often unfairly lauded as high-performing while non-selective schools with concentrations of at-risk students struggle with inadequate resources for the challenges they face. It is relatively easy for selective schools to meet performance standards because they enroll those students who are prepared for high school work and have habits of good attendance and behavior. Meeting performance

standards becomes overwhelming when the majority of ninth graders entering a high school have established behavioral risk factors such as absenteeism, behavior problems, or course failure. Without significant intervention, prior problems, particularly chronic absenteeism and course failure that predict non-graduation outcomes, quickly translate into the ninth grade warning indicators (Allensworth and Easton 2007; Mac Iver, Balfanz, and Byrnes 2009).

While “no excuses” policies rightfully emphasize the need for school leaders to actively address students’ challenges and ensure that students receive high quality instruction, it is crucial to recognize the different levels of challenge across types of schools and the need for sufficient resources to address entrenched patterns of absenteeism and lack of academic readiness. High schools with high concentrations of entering students who already display such warning signals require higher levels of support. The school district should be the first responder in these situations. Furthermore, the district not only needs to support high schools, but also address needs associated with dropout risks at earlier grade levels. In confronting the graduation gap, districts must adopt a comprehensive prevention approach. As Adelman and Taylor (2000, 7) stated, the district must “[move] prevention from the fringes into the fabric of school improvement.”

This article focuses first on what school districts have typically done to address graduation and dropout issues. It then presents a prevention model advocated by the Everyone Graduates Center within the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University, with particular focus on the leadership role of the district office in dropout prevention and recovery.

### **Typical School District Responses to Date**

The good news is that many districts have begun addressing the dropout problem. While this is a step in the right direction, typical responses are generally not systematic or sufficiently radical to address the issue adequately.

Formal research on district level actions aimed at reducing the dropout rate and increasing the graduation rate remains in the early stages. Hoyle and Collier (2006) interviewed central office administrators in ten urban districts to ascertain what these districts were doing to prevent dropout outcomes. They grouped responses into six overarching categories: (1) punishments and incentives; (2) personnel; (3) targeted programs; (4) alternative schools; (5) community involvement; and (6) instructional initiatives. Even this list of categories, that sought to impose order on a longer list of 38 individual district strategies identified, illustrates the scattered and unsystematic approach to dropout prevention that often characterizes district efforts. The researchers did find evidence in two districts of an attempt to encourage a teacher-team approach to discuss students at risk of dropping out and to coordinate interventions; and one district emphasized the provision of transition support for students as they began ninth grade. However, while all of the districts in the study had some type of program targeted to individual students who were at risk of dropping out, and some districts had designated personnel at the central office to coordinate dropout reduction efforts, there was no evidence of a systematic approach to dropout prevention in any of the districts.

Research in five Colorado school districts sponsored by the Colorado Graduates Initiative included district self-reports regarding initiatives aimed at addressing the dropout problems and how those

districts had used the project’s data analysis on behavioral early warning indicators to further develop their district response (Mac Iver, Balfanz, and Byrnes 2009). Several overarching strategies or approaches to the dropout problem emerged: (1) Creation of a dropout prevention and recovery office at the district central office; (2) creation of additional dropout recovery options including various types of alternative schools; and (3) focus on increasing attendance and reducing truancy.

Creation of a dropout prevention and recovery division within the central office demonstrates the high priority accorded this issue by the district, but it is important to ensure that this division does not become a “silo” that isolates discussion of the problem from other crucial divisions such as those focused on attendance and secondary instruction. It is essential that districts to broaden the focus of dropout prevention beyond programs targeted at individual students because these are often disconnected from the regular high school structure and historically have a mixed track record of effectiveness particularly when students are targeted based on demographic rather than behavioral indicators (Dynarski and Gleason 2002; Gleason and Dynarski 2002). Also, such a division can also easily become more focused on dropout recovery than on dropout prevention, especially if it is not strategically connected to other divisions on high school instruction and reform practices designed to increase achievement and graduation rates. Given the much higher cost of dropout recovery programs relative to regular high school programs (Montez, Cortez, and Cortez 2004), it is crucial that the district maintains a focus on systematic dropout prevention strategies.

Dropout recovery options are certainly important to meet the needs of the many students already disconnected from regular high schools. Students who are overage and undercredited (far short of the number of high school credits required for graduation, but much older than the typical student with comparable numbers of credits) need creative ways to earn a credential that will give them the ability to enter post-secondary education or secure a job that pays a living wage. It is tempting for districts to focus more heavily on recovery options, often through external service providers, and avoid the challenging work within the regular schools of preventing dropout outcomes before they occur.

A district policy of creating alternative schools for students with attendance and behavioral problems and for those who are still enrolled but overage and under-credited may be useful in some respects. It is important to recognize, however, that alternative schools often become district dumping grounds for problem students, and often do not have a very good track record in moving them to graduation (Gregg, 1998). However, districts must continue to build capacity within regular high schools to prevent the downward spiraling of students that often results in reassignment to alternative schools.

Focused district office attention on increasing attendance and reducing truancy is critical to address one of the key early warning indicators of a dropout outcome. Since this problem is generally distributed unequally among schools, and schools often inherit attendance problems from students’ prior schools, it requires district as well as school level attention. Unfortunately, the district office frequently waits until attendance problems reach the stage for legal and punitive actions, and give more attention to pursuing these types of interventions (e.g., truancy court, attendance hearings, community

truancy centers, etc.) rather than helping schools with more preventative types of solutions (Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent 2001, Mac Iver 2007).

### What Districts Need to Do

What do we know from the research literature on district level practices that are effective in improving student outcomes? Most of the research to date has focused on student achievement defined by test score results rather than successful completion as measured by on-time graduation rates. Results of several studies have emphasized the importance of data-driven decision making; a focus on improving instruction; a focus on professional development and capacity building; and a unified district approach to curriculum and instruction as opposed to each school making independent decisions (Elmore and Burney 1997; Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy 2002; Supovitz 2006; Togneri and Anderson 2003). Lessons learned from some of the comprehensive school reform models (Mac Iver and Balfanz 2000; Herlihy and Kemple 2003) have begun to be scaled up to the district level in cities like Philadelphia (Mac Iver and Mac Iver 2006); New York District #2 (Elmore and Burney 1997; D'Amico et al. 2001); San Diego (Darling-Hammond et al. 2002; Hightower 2002); and others (Hightower et al. 2002; Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy 2002). The increase in Philadelphia's graduation rate reported by Swanson (2009) may be due, at least in part, to district adoption of these comprehensive reform practices (Neild 2009a).

Addressing the question of building system capacity for increasing high school graduation rates, Supovitz (2008) stressed the role of the district in spearheading analysis focused on characteristics of dropouts, use of a local needs assessment, and coordination of efforts to use external partners in its response plan. In particular, Supovitz emphasized the need for districts to look to universities, comprehensive school reform developers, such as First Things First, Talent Development High Schools, or Career Academies; <sup>1</sup> and community resource groups to build capacity for developing and executing action plans to keep more students on track to graduation.

Although I agree with Supovitz about the need for a local needs assessment and the need for the district to be linked with community resource groups and other external partners, the Everyone Graduates Center advocates a more systematic approach for the district to keep students on track to graduation. To address the paralysis that often accompanies long "laundry lists" of action steps in both school improvement plans and district master plans, the center recommends an integrated, three-pronged approach, focused primarily on middle and high schools, that provides a framework for applying recommendations in the recent dropout prevention guide from the U.S. Department of Education (2008b). Here the center seeks to provide the succinct "vision and roadmap" requested by superintendents surveyed in a recent UCLA study of what is needed for "building a comprehensive system of learning supports" (Center for Mental Health in Schools 2008). This "ABC" response plan of Analysis, Building consensus, and Creating integrated structures requires leadership and supportive guidance from central office administrators to individual school leaders. *Analysis* for data-driven decision making must include both quantitative analysis of individual student data as well as collection and analysis of qualitative data on existing district and school level policies and practices related to attendance, behavior, and course grading at the middle and high school levels. The need to *build consensus* among school leaders and faculties on the need for

research-based practices that will help to prevent dropout outcomes cannot be ignored. Finally, *creating integrated whole-school reforms and school level student support structures*, often using the help of external partners, is crucial for ensuring appropriate, timely interventions to keep all students on track to on-time graduation.

### *Analysis for Data-Driven Decision Making*

What is necessary to equip districts to engage in a productive data-driven decision making (DDDM) process aimed at increasing their graduation rate? It is crucial to move beyond the focus on test score data that has thus far dominated the DDDM process (Mac Iver and Farley-Ripple 2009). A series of studies identifying early behavioral indicators of a dropout outcome (Allensworth and Easton 2005, 2007; Balfanz and Herzog 2005; Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver 2007; Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenburg 2008; Roderick and Camburn 1999) laid the groundwork for the type of district data analysis advocated by the guidebook of America's Promise Alliance (Balfanz et al. 2008) which has been carried out in several districts (Mac Iver, Balfanz, and Byrnes 2009; Neild and Balfanz 2006b; Plank, Boccanfuso, and Balfanz 2010). Cohort studies in several urban districts which used individual student-level data to follow a cohort of sixth graders or ninth graders forward to their on-time graduation year (and sometimes a year or two past) identified key early warning indicators of a dropout outcome: chronic absenteeism; behavior problems; and course failure. Data on these early warning indicators are essential to guide intervention efforts.

While some districts have found it useful to conduct their own longitudinal cohort studies, evidence is emerging that the early warning indicators generally remain the same across districts. A more feasible district level analysis, which would not require data over a five to eight-year period, would focus on the current distribution of students with early warning indicators across schools, particularly in grades six through nine, to help district leaders understand which schools need additional resources to implement interventions. In addition, district leaders must ensure that either district staff produce this type of analysis on a regular basis or that external partners, e.g., local universities or research organizations, are recruited to provide assistance in obtaining these types of analyses, as occurred in the analyses conducted for districts in the Colorado Graduates initiative (Mac Iver, Balfanz, and Byrnes 2009). Regardless of how these analyses are obtained, it is crucial for the district office to have current data on the number and concentration of students with early warning indicators in attendance, behavior, and course failure in order to build capacity to deliver the needed interventions.

Another important analysis is a "segmentation study," which is a retrospective study requiring the merging of individual student level data on all dropouts in the most recent year available with data several years prior to characterize dropouts not only demographically but also according to attendance patterns and high school credit accumulation. Such a study can help in determining the size of particular groups of dropouts for strategic intervention planning, for example, for those students within only a couple of credits of graduation vs. overage/undercredited students who would need a different type of high school completion program.

Districts not only need to conduct such analyses at the central office level, but also ensure that schools receive usable data in a timely fashion to be able to plan for meeting the needs of their students. For example, high schools need information on incoming ninth

graders to identify and plan interventions to address likely problems in attendance, behavior, and course failure. Ideally, the district office would help to disseminate automated real-time data to schools via systems that identify students with warning signals in order to help teams of teachers and other school staff track school level interventions and their effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> In addition, to be able to use early warning data in an effective way, school-based staff members must receive the appropriate professional development. This issue is discussed further in the section “Creating Integrated Structures.”

Besides analyzing regularly collected administrative data, the district office needs to collect and analyze qualitative data regarding actual practices in schools and classrooms in order to make good decisions about what needs to be done to increase the number of students graduating. While the school district may have implemented a variety of programs and initiatives to address the challenge of students leaving high school without a diploma, it may not have undertaken a systematic assessment of policies and practices. Such an assessment is key to data-driven decision making at the district level (Mac Iver and Farley-Ripple 2009). It involves audits of district and school level policies and programs aimed at dropout prevention and intervention; students’ classroom experiences through observations and surveys; and resources available for dropout prevention and intervention. In particular, it is crucial for school and district leaders to have good information about what is happening in classrooms every day and what kinds of school level practices could be contributing to attendance and behavior problems and course failure. The processes of collecting and reflecting upon data in each of these areas are discussed in more detail by Balfanz et al. (2008) in the *America’s Promise Grad Nation* guidebook.

This process of data analysis should also inform district planning regarding resource allocation. Ensuring that schools have the resources necessary to address these early warning indicators among their students is a crucial role for the district office to play. Given the competing demands for scarce resources, the issue of building consensus among major stakeholders becomes particularly important.

#### *Building Consensus*

Once both the quantitative and qualitative data analyses discussed above have been conducted, decisions about action steps at the district and school level will require a consensus-building process. This begins with discussion and interpretation of the data and potential changes that may be needed in resource allocation, district policies, and how teachers and administrators spend their time and do their work. While leaders are rightly advised not to begin such a process with their own preconceived ideas about the “right answers” (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NAASP] 2009), there are some overarching values and fundamental approaches upon which good leaders should seek to build consensus.

One of the key issues in such a consensus-building process is to help all members of the district community to begin with the end in mind; that is, to redefine their educational role to include the goal of keeping students on track to graduation. This might be a new idea for those teachers who view their role as limited to delivering course content. The idea that “team” is the key to lasting change” (NAASP 2009, 9) may be a shared value in the abstract, but structuring schools around teacher teams may require a period of persuasion and consensus building among faculties who value their own independence and resent greater demands upon their time. To that

end, examples of how teacher teams have successfully moved large numbers of students back on track to graduation can be particularly persuasive in such a consensus building process (*Diplomas Now 2010*).

As districts seek to implement strategies to keep all students on track to graduation, one potentially contentious issue is the idea of preventing course failure rather than simply letting students fail and assuming someone else will help them recover course credits needed for graduation sometime later. Top-down district attempts to address this issue do not have a good track record. The decision by numerous Texas districts to reduce course failures by mandating a “no grade lower than 50” policy was a response to theoretical evidence (Guskey 2002) that averaging zeros in the computation of final course grades often leads to an average below 60, i.e., a failing grade. Opposition to this policy influenced the Texas state legislature to pass Senate Bill 2033, stating that districts “may not require a classroom teacher to assign a minimum grade for an assignment without regard to the student’s quality of work” (Texas Education Agency 2009). This law has obviously diminished any potentially positive effects on student outcomes. A process of building consensus with teachers could have addressed the more fundamental issue than zeros: the opportunity for students to recover from failing interim grades, and the need for interventions to occur to ensure that students have such an opportunity. Skillful district leaders can build on a common agreement that students should be able to recover at some time, and move that conversation to discuss the district and societal costs involved in credit recovery after course failure as compared with attempts to prevent course failure.

The policy of retention in grade is another potentially contentious issue despite its demonstrated negative effect on graduation probabilities. A district practice of allowing (or even encouraging and mandating) the retention of students in elementary and middle school when they don’t meet certain criteria for promotion may have considerable support among teachers. Skillful district leaders can help groups to reach agreements to ensure the students are ready for the next grade level, for example, by helping them brainstorm alternatives to retention such as the provision of additional instruction time.

As district and school level planning unfolds, consensus has to be built around numerous strategies. While the urgency of a dropout problem may tempt leaders to skip over the process of building consensus, it is a crucial step for achieving lasting change. This type of leadership must be modeled at the district level in a way that principals can imitate as they lead their faculties. As Supovitz (2006, 9) emphasized: “District leaders are best situated to cultivate the need and rationale for change and to address people’s natural aversion to the disruption and psychological dislocation caused by change, and to shepherd school faculties through the psychological transformation that accompanies retraining.” Narrowing the graduation gap will require some fundamental changes in what happens within districts and schools, and district leaders need to motivate and equip the people who will be enacting those changes if they are to make a lasting difference.

As district leaders build consensus around what needs to happen to ensure that all students are reaching graduation, the issue of how to allocate scarce resources to achieve this end will also require skillful negotiation. Balancing the needs of both on-track and off-track students can prove particularly difficult. Finding the most effective

ways to deploy scarce resources will be essential. This leads us to the third recommendation: The importance of an integrated framework for keeping all students on track to graduation.

### *Creating Integrated Structures*

Although the details of each district and school response to keeping all students on track to graduation will necessarily differ, effective district leaders also work to build consensus on the need for an integrated approach as opposed to the fragmented and piecemeal approaches that are far too common in the pages of district master plans and school improvement plans. District leaders must lead the way in creating integrated whole school reforms and school level student support structures that will ensure appropriate, timely interventions to keep all students on track to on-time graduation. This involves clear communication and timely technical assistance to school leaders. These support structures will also require district-supported, user-friendly, real-time data systems that will allow schools to implement early warning systems and tiered interventions for struggling students, together with comprehensive, whole school reform that ensures high quality, engaging instruction in every classroom, every day.

Following a public health approach, the Everyone Graduates Center advocates district creation of a three stage (primary, secondary, and tertiary) pyramid prevention model implemented at all schools serving middle and high school students. The base or foundation of this prevention model involves district and school level universal reforms aimed at providing quality instruction that promotes engaged learning and successful high school completion with graduates ready for college or career. This foundation often is provided by an externally developed whole school reform model although districts have also successfully implemented home grown whole school reform efforts. In addition, the foundation includes a whole school approach to encouraging regular attendance and other positive behaviors. These primary prevention strategies often succeed alone with two-thirds to three-quarters of students. At the secondary level of the prevention model are targeted efforts for smaller groups of students who need additional supports beyond school level reforms to address attendance, behavior, or academic struggles. The tertiary level of the prevention model involves intensive intervention efforts, often at the one-on-one level, involving social work and mental health specialists, for the five to ten percent of students who need more clinical types of supports. While this tiered intervention approach is similar to the Response to Intervention (RTI) model (Duffy 2007) and to Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) models, the three stage pyramid prevention model emphasizes an integrated approach to academic and behavioral problems that is not generally seen in implementations of RTI or PBIS. Researchers and practitioners are only beginning to link these together systematically (Sandomierski, Kincaid, and Algozzine [n.d.]; Sugai 2007; Sugai and Horner 2007).

Foundation of the prevention model. The base or foundation of the prevention model pyramid involves ensuring that high quality instruction is happening in the classroom each day, and that school level structures are in place to promote positive behaviors (including high attendance) and a positive learning environment for students. This emphasis on school wide instructional excellence and coherence, as well as school wide positive behavior systems, is a crucial foundation for ensuring student success (and preventing

dropout outcomes). When more than half (and often more than three-quarters) of ninth graders enter high school with risk factors (low middle school attendance, significantly below grade level reading and math proficiency, prior course failure and/or retentions), these “overstressed” high schools have considerable difficulty in responding to such overwhelming needs (Herlihy and Quint 2006, 1). District office support in establishing such a primary foundation can often benefit from additional technical assistance from externally developed comprehensive school reform (CSR) models. In particular, district office assistance is often crucial to help school instructional leaders identify how to improve school climate and instructional practice, and which whole school reform strategies are strong enough to match the scale and scope of the problem. District leadership is also crucial in ensuring the professional development time is not wasted (as it frequently is), but rather productively used to help improve teacher practice.

Comprehensive whole school reform models at the middle and high school level share many key principles (e.g., personalization, creation of small learning communities, improvement of instructional practice through extensive professional development), but often differ considerably on the extent to which they provide specific curriculum and instructional support to teachers. (See Mac Iver, 2007, for a more detailed discussion.) Herlihy and Quint (2006) summarize specific practices from four different high school reform models (Talent Development, Career Academies, First Things First, and Project GRAD) that seek to help high-poverty schools improve student achievement and graduation rates, with varying rates of success thus far. The High School Reform toolkit (Legters, Smerdon, and Early 2009) provides a comprehensive summary of reform-based practices, including useful checklists for district leaders.

To create a personalized learning environment, these models advocate small learning communities (SLCs) that often involve interdisciplinary teacher teams who share responsibility for a group of students. These models also specifically address improvement of instructional content and practice and the need for coherence across the school (Newmann et al. 2001). In addition to high quality professional development for faculty, some of the models also provide curricula and lesson plans, including “catch-up” courses in reading and mathematics, to help ensure that teachers faced with overwhelming numbers of underprepared students do not have to spend additional time finding materials to create their own lessons. There is growing evidence that such reforms are associated with higher rates of attendance, course passing, and high school graduation (Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver 2007; Kemple and Snipes 2000; Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith 2003; Kemple 2004; Quint et al. 2005; Snipes et al. 2006) although as Herlihy and Quint (2006) point out, there remains a long way to go to increase graduation rates for urban students.

Another important component of an integrated approach to dropout prevention is the institutionalization of transition support for students entering ninth grade (Neild 2009b). Some students have failed multiple courses in ninth grade before they even realize what a credit is and why they need it for graduation. Ninth graders, who are at the peak of adolescent turmoil, need explicit socialization into the expectations and requirements of high school. Districts need to ensure that structures such as summer bridge programs are implemented well and deliver effective support to students entering high school, resulting in higher rates of attendance and course passing.

The need to add an early warning system to the schoolwide foundation. Even when schools have a solid foundation of high quality instruction in every classroom every day and positive behavioral supports in place, some students will still need additional support. For this reason, it is essential for schools to add a data-based early warning system as a foundational practice to identify which students are particularly at risk of failing to arrive at high school graduation so that interventions at the secondary and tertiary levels of the drop-out prevention model discussed below can be effectively carried out (Jerald 2006; Kennelly and Monrad 2007; Pinkus 2008). Such an early warning system, like the tools now in place throughout Louisiana and in the Chicago and Boston public schools (National Governors Association 2008; Gewertz 2009a) includes data, such as prior attendance, test scores, course failures, and suspensions, that indicate students in need of intervention to keep them on track to high school graduation. Timely provision of data, data management tools, and technical assistance to ensure that schools can implement such an early warning and intervention system is a crucial role for the district office in helping to close the graduation gap.

Intervention at the secondary and tertiary levels. As in public health models, universal practices aimed at dropout prevention at the primary level will ideally be successful for the large majority of students; but secondary and tertiary levels of intervention are necessary to address the needs of students who are not successful with whole school practices alone. While districts can often point to numerous intervention strategies listed in their master plans and individual school improvement plans, districts must systematically and honestly assess whether the components are integrated in a way that is effective. Piecemeal approaches may resemble a pretty patchwork quilt but are rarely effective in ensuring that all students who are falling off track to graduation are identified and receive the interventions needed.

School leaders often need district guidance to understand how an integrated, tiered intervention model can impose order on the multitude of individual interventions they are juggling. The three-tiered model assumes that schools will seek to address problems first at the whole school level, moving to targeted interventions at the secondary level, and then to more intensive interventions at the tertiary level only when efforts at lower levels have not proved effective. Targeted small group intervention for attendance and behavior problems can provide solutions before these problems become intensive issues requiring more expensive interventions. Tertiary level interventions would generally require social services providers and a one-to-one ratio to address student needs. The prevention model provides a way to coordinate all types of interventions in an integrated way, replacing the patchwork of independent programs that may often allow students to fall through the cracks or even work at cross-purposes with each other in a fragmented, ineffective fashion.

School leaders will probably require assistance to design and implement intervention systems that begin by assessing the extent of the need and identifying which systemic and whole school steps need to be taken to prevent the majority of problems before they require intervention. They may also need district help to implement intervention systems that effectively address all issues, coordinating help from various sources so that these efforts result in students getting back on track to graduation. The barriers or logjams that need to be addressed at the secondary and tertiary levels are primarily related to

time for interventions to be implemented and human resources to implement them. Technical assistance from the district can help school leaders solve these problems. The district office also has a role to play in helping school leaders evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions and take appropriate action to shift gears in “standard operating procedures” when results indicate the need for further improvement.

The Everyone Graduates Center is currently involved in implementing this integrated prevention model in several schools throughout the country under the Diplomas Now project, a joint effort of the Talent Development Program at Johns Hopkins University, City Year, Communities in Schools, and the PepsiCo Foundation (Gewertz 2009b; Herzog et al. 2009). The key components of this early warning and tiered response system are: (1) provision of regularly updated warning indicator data, from routinely collected student data, on each student to interdisciplinary teacher teams, support staff, and administrators; (2) regular bi-weekly meetings of school personnel teams to discuss students with warning indicators, plan interventions, and follow up on implemented interventions, making changes as indicated; and (3) organization of a “second team of adults,” including public service corps members and volunteers as well as social services professionals, to assist in delivery of interventions for students showing warning indicators. Data from the pilot year of the program in a Philadelphia middle school indicated significant reductions in the number of students exhibiting off-track indicators in attendance, behavior, and course performance (Diplomas Now 2010). While it will be several more years until we can judge the model’s success in producing more high school graduates prepared for college and career, the early evidence of its success in reducing the number of off-track students has been encouraging.

One of the key components of the Diplomas Now model is its attempt to address the need for additional human resources through lower-cost sources. Keeping all students on track to graduation will require additional resources, but how can we pay for them? The use of national service organizations like City Year is one way to provide additional resources while at the same time maintaining a systematic, integrated approach to increasing graduation rates. Schools often flounder when managing various bodies of volunteers. This integrated structure provides a way for schools to coordinate the efforts of volunteer workers.

While external providers have historically jumpstarted reform efforts, as they did in the comprehensive school reform (CSR) movement, ensuring that all schools take such a systematic approach to keeping students on track to graduation will ultimately require leadership at the district office level. As Supovitz (2006, 15) points out, “experiments in alternative formulations for districts have only served to reinforce the central role of districts in supporting sustainable school reform.” It is time that districts extend what they have learned about school improvement to systematically address the graduation gap issue.

## **Conclusions**

Increasing high school graduation rates is a systemic issue, not just a school level issue. The district office therefore has a key role to play in narrowing the graduation gap and ensuring that more students earn their high school diplomas well-equipped for college or career. This article has articulated a clear vision of a systematic,

integrated approach to addressing this issue for district leaders. The three-pronged ABC approach calls for district and school leaders to:

- Analyze data to identify and address early warning indicators of dropout as well as policies and practices related to student attendance, behavior, and course failure;
- Build consensus among school leaders and faculties on the need to implement research-based practices that will help prevent dropout outcomes through reducing absences, suspensions, and course failures, and providing recovery opportunities for students before they drop out;
- Create integrated whole school reforms and school level student support structures, including early warning systems, that will ensure appropriate, timely interventions to keep all students on track to on-time graduation.

This is a cyclical approach that requires regular collection and analysis of data to evaluate the effectiveness of what schools are doing and adjustments when the need for further improvements is indicated. Applying such a cycle of inquiry to addressing the graduation gap is a fundamental practice of a well-functioning school district learning community that begins with the end in mind.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For further information on these programs, see Dropout Prevention (What Works Clearinghouse, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education) <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/topic.aspx?tid=06>.

<sup>2</sup> This would generally involve purchase of a system from one of the growing number of vendors of early warning systems.

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