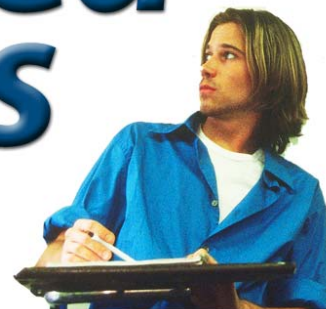


A Bridges Transitions White Paper

Connected Students

*The Key to School-Initiated
Graduation Rate Improvement*



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Executive Summary

The ‘No Child Left Behind Act’ of 2001 (NCLB) is a brave new direction for education in America. Prior to this legislation, the search for resolving issues of ‘students left behind’ was focused on the ‘dropout’. NCLB shifts this focus from ‘at-risk students’ to ‘at-risk schools.’ For the first time, schools are held accountable for the productivity of their programs.

The primary goal of NCLB is that every student will have “proficient levels of achievement” in reading and math by 2014. Schools are expected to show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) towards this goal, through use of state-based and mandated national tests. In high schools, a ‘secondary indicator’ of AYP must be graduation rate.

Two general types of measures are most commonly referenced when defining graduation rate. The traditional National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) measure uses inconsistent dropout measures and low-value GED credentials to determine graduation rate percentages. NCLB recommends a new type of measure, one focused on the 9th grade cohort and the number of graduates four years later. This paper recommends that states adopt the more accurate NCLB measure, even though we recognize this places greater pressure on state schools to perform.

Recent research illustrates the high value of graduating more students on time. High school graduates live longer, are healthier, are more likely to be employed, are paid better, and have a better quality of life than those who do not complete high school. Communities with high grad rates are financially stronger, socially stronger, and have less crime than those with lower graduation rates. Schools with high grad rates retain more funding, its students demonstrate better attitudes, and its leaders are better respected than those whose grad rates are lower. Students demonstrate increasing dissatisfaction with the relevance of their high school education in college and the workplace. There are many benefits when educational leaders develop effective graduation rate improvement programs.

Research to support 10 different strategies for school-initiated graduation rate improvement is presented. The strategies support the perspective that student ‘connectedness’ to school is the key to program success. The more connected a student is to school, the more likely she or he will graduate on time.

The 10 strategies are organized around three different themes of school-initiated student engagement – academic connections, social connections and self-managed connections (*see text on left*).

10 Strategies for GRIP

Theme 1: Academic Connections

- (a) ‘High Standards, Added Support’ for Every Student
- (b) Relevant Active Learning Activities
- (c) Alternate Learning Programs

Theme 2: Social Connections

- (a) Smaller Schools
- (b) Student-Teacher Connections
- (c) Peer Connections
- (d) Family-School Connections

Theme 3: Self-Managed Connections

- (a) Sequenced Planning/Self-Management Discipline of Study
- (b) Community-Assisted Learning
- (c) Individual Career/Educational Counseling

A school-initiated graduation rate improvement program must be designed to meet the unique needs of its student population. However, this paper recommends the engagement of every student as a unifying theme for strategic program development. Every program must include elements of academic, social, and self-managed connections. The quickest and most effective means for driving graduation rate improvement is the development of an outcome-based 6th – 12th grade discipline of study focused on teaching planning and self-management skills to students.

Research provides a strong foundation for the development of effective program implementation strategies. However, research is just theory. The successful implementation of any program comes down to the drive, talents, and determination of a few purposeful people. This paper features four key management attributes of effective graduation rate improvement programs:

- 1) Commitment, Vision and Program Goals
- 2) Leadership Team
- 3) Implementation Team
- 4) Accountability and Communication Systems

Executive leaders are challenged to make the commitment and tough decisions involved in the implementation of a quality graduation rate improvement program. They are encouraged to establish a well-selected leadership team and implementation team to deliver on the district's grad rate improvement vision and program goals. These teams are well-resourced and supported in their decisions to achieve defined district goals. This paper places particular emphasis on the vital importance of quality professional development. In addition, accountability and communication systems provide ongoing cause and effect data that guides continuous program development.

Each young person entering the 21st century world of work must plan and self-manage a lifetime of learning and work/life transitions. They must see themselves as a 'portfolio learner', gathering skills, credentials, experiences and personal networks from a diversity of educational, work, and life activities and using them to successfully transition from one opportunity to the next. A regular high school graduation diploma provides the minimum credentials required to access modern workplace opportunities. As a result, no child can be left behind in the pursuit of a regular graduation for all students.

Graduation rate improvement is the best focus for aligning the present-day school system to meet the diversity of needs in the world that surrounds it. As the research shows, the key is more 'Connected Students.' We encourage every educational professional to make the engagement of students with school their highest priority.

Introduction

This paper:

- **Defines** “graduation rate”
- **Summarizes** the latest research on the value of graduation rate improvement
- **Proposes** a comprehensive school-initiated program that fosters and measures each student’s ‘connectedness’ to school.

All new learning happens when a student **connects something new to something familiar**. All relationships begin when two people connect through shared experience. A sense of purpose develops for an individual when ‘something they are’ connects with ‘something they could be’. In each case, **the connection is the conduit for meaningful growth and development**.

Meaningful learning, relationships and sense of purpose are important contributors to the health of any person. They are also the three key themes for the proposed school-initiated graduation rate improvement program featured in this report.

The majority of high school students have post-secondary intentions —91% of 10th grade students expect to complete a post-secondary degree.¹ However, four years after 9th grade, 32% have not graduated, and 10 years after 9th grade, only 18% have completed a post-secondary program.² Although students aspire to achieve high school and post-secondary success, many have not developed the motivation, skills, support or resilience required to complete their educational goals.

The *‘No Child Left Behind’ Act* has made graduation rate a requisite consideration for every U.S. high school. This paper explains the two primary methods used to define the national graduation rate, producing significantly different measures of 68%³ and 86.5%⁴. It suggests that startling numbers of students are leaving their educational programs before completion, and presents research to illustrate the benefits lost to the student, their community and their school. The paper provides 10 different graduation rate improvement strategies, supported by extensive research from over 80 different sources. It concludes with a recommended set of attributes to a quality school-initiated graduation rate improvement program.

Many factors contributing to an individual’s decision to ‘drop out’ are beyond the control of schools. However, “it is widely acknowledged that schools exert powerful influences on student achievement, including dropout rates.”⁵ Schools must shift their focus to things they control that positively influence student graduation success.

This white paper suggests what the research reveals — that **schools will be most successful at graduation rate improvement when they focus on every student’s meaningful connection with school**.

The Basics of *No Child Left Behind*

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*⁶ (NCLB) outlined a new direction for education in America. The Department of Education described it as, “a historic new law that will change the culture of U.S. schools.”⁷ The change is significant, emphasizing a focus on school, district and state accountability for adequately educating every student. NCLB expects that every student will have “proficient levels of achievement” in reading and math by 2014.

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”

NCLB allocates federal funding to serve those with the greatest need. To access federal funds, states must “develop strong systems of accountability based upon student performance.”⁸ States are required to evaluate the effectiveness of every district and school using common achievement tests.

Each state is expected to establish annual benchmarks for reading and math in every school and district, which are measured and reported each year. Schools must demonstrate ‘**Adequate Yearly Progress**’ (AYP) towards those benchmarks, in each of eight different disaggregated subgroups (for example, economically disadvantaged, ethnic groups), as well as aggregate growth across the subgroups. Analysis of this data allows districts to plan strategies for reducing “achievement gaps” between subgroups.⁹

It’s not a good thing for a school or district to fail in its AYP. Miss two years in a row and your school could be tagged as “needing improvement.” This could get you into the distasteful “progressive sanctions” sequence, which may result in an externally provided school improvement plan, withdrawal of federal funds, the firing of staff or school closure.¹⁰ Every administrator is keen to avoid these sanctions.

NCLB’s emphasis on organizational accountability has forced state leaders to revisit local standards, considering the high risks associated with not achieving them. The legislation gives each state the right to use its own tests and standards to determine AYP. This is regarded as a compelling ‘loophole’ by critics of the legislation.

“One flaw in the formula of AYP,” suggests a school administrator’s guide, “is that it provides a strong incentive for states to lower the scores students must exceed on their state test in order to achieve ‘proficiency’.”¹¹ There is evidence this already occurs,¹² providing great variance in the meaning of AYP across the nation.

‘Academic achievement’ is only one indicator of Adequate Yearly Progress in NCLB. Each school must also establish a secondary indicator. In high schools, that indicator must be graduation rate. This vital indicator of high school success is explained in the next section of this paper.

Graduation Rate Explained

Graduation Rate NCLB 1111(b)(2)(c)(vi)

“the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years.”

In the rules of NCLB, graduation rate must be the ‘secondary indicator’ of achievement for high schools. Graduation rate is defined as “the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years.”¹³ Law makers likely included this measure to discourage administrators from improving AYP test performance by systematically removing those students with the lower scores.

Each educational leader must determine how to improve test score performance while enabling more disadvantaged students to graduate on time. This creates a great challenge, one whose honest resolution could be tremendous for an educational system seeking relevance for all students in the 21st century.

How Graduation Rate is Measured

Each state is free to establish its own means for measuring graduation rate. Not surprisingly, graduation rate standards across the country vary from state to state. An analysis of every state’s method for graduation rate calculation is available through Kathy Christie’s January 2005 report, *Target Attendance and Graduation Rates and How They are Calculated*.¹⁴

There are two common ways that states calculate graduation rate for high school:

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Measure

Before the new NCLB standard, this was the primary measure recommended by the Department of Education. The total number of 12th grade graduates is divided by that same number of graduates plus known dropouts from 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades. The NCES national graduation rate in 2001 was **86.5%**.¹⁵

Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) Measure

This system aligns well with the grad rate definition outlined in NCLB. Students are defined as a cohort by their entry into high school (typically 9th grade) and compared to the population of graduates in that cohort four years later. Adjustments are made for annual transfers in, transfers out, and deaths. The CPI national graduation rate in 2001 was **68%**.¹⁶

See how your state measures graduation rate

Check pages 19 to 42 of Kathy Christie’s report entitled, [‘Target Attendance and Graduation Rates and How They are Calculated’](#) (January 2005).¹⁴

“
No one tells the
truth about
dropout rates in
their own district.

”

It is clearly to a state’s advantage to use the NCES measure for calculating graduation rate. NCES enables more schools and districts to meet minimum requirements, keeping the AYP wolves from the door. According to a Harvard report, “All the states for which disaggregated graduation rates could be calculated (46 and DC) would fail if a real standard for graduation rates and meaningful accountability were imposed.”¹⁷

Why Grad Rate Measures Are So Different

The NCES measure provides an ‘easy route’ for states to meet minimum AYP standards. However, its reliance on dropout data makes it a flawed indicator of true graduation rate. Dropout data are universally known to be poorly tracked, as most students do not sign out of school when they leave. Administrators are left with an option of what code to apply to the student who is no longer there. It is advantageous to guess that a student has transferred to another district rather than guess they have left school. As one anonymous researcher said, “No one tells the truth about dropout rates in their own district.”

The use of dropout data is not the only reason for the vast difference in NCES and CPI/NCLB grad rate calculations. The NCES measure includes General Educational Development (GED) students; the CPI/NCLB measures do not. The GED is not an equivalent credential to a regular high school diploma. Although some studies report some post-certification value to a GED¹⁸, others report, “no difference between the outcomes for a dropout and a recipient of an equivalency certificate.”¹⁹ This can also be said for dead-end ‘non-academic’ tracks in some high schools.

It is hard to resist an easier educational path if the rest of your life seems too hard. Harvard University researchers found that, “in the past 10 years, the percentage of high school students completing a GED...has more than doubled. Specifically, 10% of all young people completed high school through an alternate means in 1998, compared to 4 percent in 1988.”²⁰

GED and other non-academic pathways to ‘graduation’ offer a compelling ‘easy route’ for students, just as NCES measures are an ‘easy route’ for educational leaders. In both cases, many believe the tougher path should be the only choice, as it offers far more long-term benefits.

We believe the CPI standards for tracking graduation rate, as recommended in the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, is the preferred method for evaluating the true nature of grad rate achievement, and it must be adopted by each state, district and school.

“
In truth, every race, gender and socio-economic group has a problem with dropouts.”

Disaggregating Graduation Rate Data

Grad rate calculations are complicated further when districts disaggregate the data, as required by NCLB. Every racial, gender and socio-economic group has issues with grad rate. (See Table A)

Table A²¹

National Graduation Rate By Race and Gender	Nation	Female	Male
<i>American Indian</i>	51.1%	51.4%	47%
<i>Asian/Pacific Islander</i>	76.8%	80%	72.6%
<i>Hispanic</i>	53.2%	58.5%	48%
<i>Black</i>	50.2%	56.2%	42.8%
<i>White</i>	74.9%	77%	70.8%
All Students	68%	72%	64.1%

As a result of expanded media coverage of this percentage-oriented disaggregated data, the public's perception of a typical dropout is a 'minority male from a poor income family.' In fact, if you put all 505,000 of America's 2001 school dropouts in one room, the typical dropout would be a 'white male from a middle class family.'

Of the 505,000 dropouts in 2001:

- 278,000 (55.1%) were White non-Hispanics
- 112,000 (22.1%) were Hispanic
- 97,000 (19.3%) were Black
- 9,000 (1.9%) were Asian/Pacific Islanders.²²

Even more interesting is the breakout for the socio-economic status of the dropout's family:

- 323,000 (63.9%) were from "middle income" families
- 131,000 (26%) were from "low income" families
- 51,000 (10.1%) came from families designated "high income"²³

The confusion comes from presenting percentage statistics for racial and socio-economic groups that are significantly different in size. In truth, every race, gender, and socio-economic group has a problem with dropouts.

Confusion about graduation rate does not diminish its vital importance for modern schools. In the past, education did not need to be inclusive of all students. Today, a more literate, technical, and fast-paced world requires every student to graduate from high school. **We believe a focus on graduating every student offers the most meaningful path for aligning schools with the needs of the 21st century.**



Many schools are still providing ‘dead-end programs’.... Some even believe these old programs and practices are good for students. They are not.



The Benefits of Graduating Every Student

The 21st century workplace has raised the bar for what are considered entry-level qualifications. To assure a sustainable existence, every student must complete both high school and some form of post-secondary training. Despite these higher standards, a startling one third of students do not graduate on time. This is as a far more serious social issue than it was in the past.

Existing educational practices for troubled and troublesome students were developed in a time when every student did not need to stay in school and graduate on a regular program. In the past, a student unable to achieve success in the academic system was put on a ‘vocational’ track designed to prepare students for direct entry to work. Students who did not fit this lesser track were not encouraged to stay in school, as the workplace would provide the requisite training for gainful employment.

Today’s workplace doesn’t offer a training ground to more challenging students. Technical training is expensive and service positions are filled by individuals far more educated than those who leave school. Every student must graduate from high school with a regular diploma to be competitive in today’s labor market.

Although the world has moved to a different place, many schools are still providing ‘dead-end programs’ and practicing progressive disengagement with those students who do not fit the academic mold. Some even believe these old programs and practices are good for students. They are not.

There is extensive research on the costs of school dropouts and the benefits of school completion. For the purpose of this paper, the research has been organized into three categories – individual benefits, community benefits, and school benefits. As the research illustrates, the social and economic costs of non-graduating students are enormous, while the benefits of improved graduation rates are many. We simply cannot allow the more challenging students to quietly disappear from the tapestry of school.



There is a cause and effect relationship between more education and living longer.



Individual Benefits

There are many benefits to the student who completes high school. They include:

- ✓ **Graduates Live Longer** – There is a cause and effect relationship between more education and living longer. Becoming more educated reduces your probability of dying in the next 10 years by 3.6% per year of education.²⁴ This is supported by National Vital Statistics Report data.²⁵
- ✓ **Graduates Are Healthier** – 78% of college degree-carrying adults report being in excellent or very good health, compared to 66% who have some education beyond high school, 56% of high school graduates, and 39% of those who never graduated.²⁶
- ✓ **Graduates Are More Likely to Have a Job** – A January 2005 Bureau of Labor Statistics report indicated the unemployment rate for adults with no high school diploma was 8.3%, 70% higher than for adult high school graduates (4.9%).²⁷ The problem is much worse for youth. In October 2002, 28.2% of youths who had dropped out in the previous 12 months were unemployed. In comparison, the unemployment rate of 1998 high school graduates who were not enrolled in college was much lower, at 18.4%.²⁸ Statistically, high school grads have an employment advantage over those who fail to graduate.
- ✓ **Graduates Are Paid More** – No matter what your gender, you earn more with more schooling. In 2002, male and female high school graduates earned 23% and 27% more, respectively, than male and female high school dropouts.²⁹ High school graduates will earn \$369,818 more dollars than dropouts during their 40 year working life.³⁰ Average annual earnings also improve with additional education beyond high school. A person with a two-year vocational degree will earn \$620,758 more than a dropout, while bachelor's degree holders will average \$1,121,183 more in earnings.³¹
- ✓ **Graduates Have Better Quality of Life** – Better-educated people demonstrate lower levels of emotional and physical stress, less depression and anxiety, higher levels of enjoyment and vitality, are less likely to divorce, have higher personal control, demonstrate increased levels of social support and are more likely to be satisfied with their work.³² Authors of a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between education and quality of life define education as “a root cause of individual well-being.”³³

“
Schools have traditionally benefited by removing or marginalizing problematic students. In today’s educational and work climate, this can no longer be regarded as best practice.”

Community Benefits

- ✓ **High Grad Rate Communities Are Financially Stronger** – The National Dropout Prevention Center lists a variety of economic benefits to graduation rate improvement, including increased tax revenue (“the estimated tax revenue loss from every male... that did not complete high school would be approximately \$944 billion”) and decreased workplace literacy costs (“The cost to taxpayers of adult illiteracy is \$224 billion per year”)³⁴
- ✓ **High Grad Rate Communities Are Socially Stronger** – Increasing the number of graduates in a community reduces the number of community members who require assistance. Research tells us that dropouts are “more likely to have health problems,” and “become dependent on welfare and other government programs.”³⁵ Dropouts are more likely to engage in “high-risk behaviors such as premature sexual activity, early pregnancy, delinquency, crime, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide has been found to be significantly higher among dropouts.”³⁶
- ✓ **High Grad Rate Communities Have Less Crime** – 59% of America’s federal prison inmates, and 75% of those in state prisons, are high school dropouts. High school dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested in their lifetime. A 1% increase in high school graduation rates would save approximately \$1.4 billion in incarceration costs, or about \$2,100 per male high school graduate.³⁷ One study estimates that the social savings from crime reduction associated with high school graduation (for men) is between 14 and 26 percent.³⁸

School Benefits

Schools have traditionally benefited by removing or marginalizing problematic students. In today’s educational and work climate, this can no longer be regarded as ‘best practice.’ Fortunately, there are advantages to schools with high graduation rates. They include:

- ✓ **High Grad Rate Schools Retain More Funding** – The average per-pupil funding was \$8,156 in 2004.³⁹ The average high school size was 753 students.⁴⁰ NCES stats indicate that an average of 5% of students dropout of school each year.⁴¹ For the average high school, this represents 37.65 students, or \$307,073 in additional financial resources, walking out the door annually. Schools with higher rates of student retention retain additional revenues for additional teachers and expanded school programs.



Achievement of a regular high school diploma keeps each individual in the game, providing her or him with the opportunity to access whatever future they can imagine.



- ✓ **High Grad Rate School Students Demonstrate Better Attitudes** – Improved student attendance rates and school climate are reported when staff are involved in the delivery of a quality dropout prevention initiative.⁴² Obviously, if more students are electing to complete school, a higher percentage of the student body sees the school experience in a more positive light.
- ✓ **High Grad Rate School Leaders Are Better Respected By Staff** – 90% of teachers involved in a dropout prevention strategy recognized their Principal as “a supportive local leader.”⁴³ Research indicates that middle schools with high enrollments in college prep courses have “strong leaders who set clear goals and priorities...and provide support for both teachers’ and students’ needs.”⁴⁴ Most staff want students to succeed. Principals who can concurrently meet the needs of most educators and students will be well supported by the teaching staff.
- ✓ **High Grad Rate Schools Are More Relevant to Students** – According to Achieve, Inc.’s February 2005 *Rising to the Challenge* report, “a substantial number of recent high school graduates feel that gaps exist between their high school education and the skills, abilities and work habits expected of them today.”⁴⁵ An NCES study reports that, in 2000, 28% of 12th grade students said school was “often or always meaningful”, compared to 40% in 1983 and 36% in 1990.⁴⁶ 39% believe “school learning will be quite or very important for later life,” down from 51% in 1983 and 47% in 1990.⁴⁷ The focus of school is becoming increasingly irrelevant, providing increasing numbers of young people with insufficient preparation for the future. A school that retains more students will have conquered those irrelevancies, becoming more effective at getting every student ready for entry to the 21st century world of work and education.

Without a regular graduation from high school, educational and employment opportunities diminish. Achievement of a regular high school diploma keeps each individual in the game, providing the opportunity to access whatever future they can imagine. It is no surprise that elementary, middle and secondary schools across the nation are proactively seeking effective ways to keep more students in school. In the majority of those cases, educational leaders are developing initiatives that increase or maintain each student’s ‘connectedness’ to school. The next section looks at research on ‘what works’ for enabling more students to graduate from high school on the regular diploma program.



Most dropouts
know they will not
improve their lives
by leaving school.
They leave anyway.



Graduation Rate Improvement Strategies

Everything an individual chooses to do is an act of significance or consequence. Each choice we make is a reflection of one of these human perspectives. Choices of significance (proactive choices) are driven by a natural instinct to make a difference. At the end of our lives, each of us wants to look back knowing our existence has had meaning to someone or something. These choices are usually made with future possibilities in mind. They are the essence of **hope and inspiration**.

Choices of consequence (reactive choices) are driven by a natural instinct to be safe and loved. In this rapidly changing world, we seek comfort from consistency, love, inclusion, acceptance, and the attention of others. These choices are made with the past or immediate moment in mind. They are the essence of **security and desire**.

Everyone must live aspects of their life driven by consequence, responding to the needs of others. We do not live in a cave. We're in personal relationships, we work for other people, we have customers, we belong to teams or clubs, and we live in communities shared with other people. These human connections are vital to give us a sense of belonging and cooperation within our communities. In response to the needs of others, much of everyone's day must be reactive.

However, if an individual's life is 100% consequential (reactive), it is exhausting and de-motivating. For health and personal vitality, every individual must live part of their day focused on activities that have personal meaning and significance. This proactive behavior enables people to create connections, new understandings, stronger relationships, and new opportunities for themselves.

Most students choosing to leave school are making a consequential or reactive decision. Dropouts leave in response to feeling unsafe, unwanted, excluded or insignificant. The disengagement with school begins long before the student actually leaves the school experience, with a cumulating series of disconnections from academic instruction, school relationships, and future possibilities. Most dropouts know they will not improve their lives by leaving school. They leave anyway.

For a school to successfully operate a graduation rate improvement program, it must be designed with significance in mind. Schools must avoid the reactive inclination to focus the responsibility on things beyond its control, like gender, race, or socio-economic status. Schools are not the policy-makers who can focus on those issues. Instead, educational leaders must seek to maximize the connections every student has with school, engaging them academically, socially, and personally.



The more connected a student is to school, the more likely she or he will graduate on time.



The path to grad rate improvement is through the significant engagement of more students with school. This involves a complete rethinking of the way an educational institution operates.

Fortunately, there is ample research to support proactive strategies designed to engage a student. The 21st century emphasis on ‘what works’ assures that schools will shift their focus from the consequential attributes of students and schools to a significant focus on every student’s ‘connectedness’ to the school experience. This connectedness is the key to enabling more students to graduate on time.

‘Connecting’ Strategies

The more connected a student is to school, the more likely she or he will graduate on time. There is abundant research and leadership to guide a school seeking to improve its graduation rate by engaging an increasing number of students. For this paper, the research is organized into three themes:

Theme 1: Academic Connections

- (a) ‘High Standards, Added Support’ for Every Student
- (b) Relevant/Active Learning Activities
- (c) Alternate Learning Programs

Theme 2: Social Connections

- (a) Smaller Schools
- (b) Student-Teacher Connections
- (c) Peer Connections
- (d) Family-School Connections.

Theme 3: Self-Managed Connections

- (a) Sequenced Planning/Self-Management Discipline of Study
- (b) Community-Assisted Learning
- (c) Individual Career/Educational Counseling

No one intervention is enough. Each school seeking to concurrently improve graduation rate and student achievement must implement a comprehensive program featuring elements uniquely suited to its student population. However, a common focus for implementation and evaluation in every program must be the connectedness of each student. This is the most productive focus a school can take to support meaningful graduation rate improvement.

Academic Connections



...since states have begun enacting legislation increasing graduation requirements, the percentage of high school graduates completing more difficult courses has risen.



Theme 1: Academic Connections

Poor academic performance is the single strongest school-related predictor of dropping out.⁴⁸ When schools fails to academically reach a child, evidence shows a cause-and-effect relationship with their subsequent disengagement from school and increase in risk-taking behavior. “National longitudinal data show that, regardless of ethnic background or social class, youth who have problems with schoolwork are more likely than others to be involved in every health risk studied, including alcohol, sexual intercourse, and weapon-related violence.”⁴⁹

Therefore, a comprehensive set of grad rate improvement strategies must focus on connecting individuals to the curricular offerings of the school. Abundant research supports several strategies for increasing a student’s academic connectedness to schools. The three most commonly cited academic strategies are reviewed below.

1a. Higher Standards, Added Support for Every Student Higher Standards for All Students

The U.S. Department of Education’s (DOE) *New American High Schools*’ initiative identifies a variety of 21st century reform strategies for high schools. Its first suggestion is to raise academic standards and expectations for all students.⁵⁰ Graduates who faced high expectations in high school are more likely to feel prepared for college and the workplace.⁵¹ Several reports support this strategy, including a 2003 study of 13 Georgia high schools that concurrently raised student achievement and graduation rates. It concluded that the biggest driver of student success was, “being more precise about the quality and level of work expected from students across all classes.”⁵²

This perspective runs contrary to the traditional school practice of providing less challenging program pathways for ‘at-risk’ students. Schools benefit from allowing more difficult students to take less difficult programs. These practices, however, have unintentionally allowed students to incrementally disconnect from the essential aspects of school. Some schools feel torn between the limited long-term value of easier courses and the fear of losing students if all were held to a common standard. This makes it tougher to determine the best path to ‘No Child Left Behind.’

Modern research guides us to the best path. Raising standards does not necessarily result in more students leaving school. Department of Education research suggests that, “...since states have begun enacting legislation increasing graduation requirements, the percentage of high school graduates completing more difficult courses has risen.” They go on to suggest that “to improve the performance of all students, schools must engage in a range of innovative practices that include eliminating tracking students by ability, integrating academic and vocational curricula, and raising graduation requirements.”⁵³



Schools must accompany higher expectations for all students with increased support.



Added Support for All Students

Eliminating systemic pathways that disengage students is wise in a world where high school graduation is a necessary ticket to further education. **We support the removal of dead-end alternatives to real graduation. Schools must accompany higher expectations for all students with increased support.**

A growing body of research supports the dual practice of high expectations for all students and expanded provision of student assistance to meet those expectations.⁵⁴ “High expectations accompanied by teacher supportiveness fosters high school achievement,”⁵⁵ says the *ERIC Digest on Alternatives for High-Risk Youth*. In the 2002 *High Schools That Work Assessment*, four of the five ‘main drivers’ for school achievement relate to the combination of higher standards and expanded support.⁵⁶

Preparation for a knowledge-based economy requires that all students are involved in higher-level thinking curricula. Preparation for a work environment of continuous change requires that all students obtain credentials with value beyond high school. Twenty-first century schools must respond by ‘raising the bar’ of school standards for all students. These greater expectations must be accompanied with a variety of support services, including individual assistance, test-taking training, self-managed remediation resources, tutoring services, and other forms of academic support.

1b. Relevant/Active Learning Activities

The National Association of Secondary School Principals recently produced *Breaking Ranks II – Strategies for Leading High School Reform*⁵⁷. One of its three ‘core areas’ for student success, is “Making Learning Personal: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment.” It recommends methods for making learning more relevant, including:

- An integrated curriculum across subject areas
- Engaging classroom activities
- Connections to real-life applications of learning
- Active learning
- Use of technology in the classroom

Research from the National Research Council Institute of Medicine, suggested similar findings. “Evidence indicates that when instruction draws on students’ pre-existing understandings, interests, culture, and real-world experiences, the curriculum becomes more meaningful to them.”⁵⁸ Clearly, students will remain attentive and interested when instruction is varied, active and appropriately challenging.

These findings should not surprise anyone. All new learning happens when the learner connects something new to something familiar. Quality teachers create stories, activities, role-plays, lab scenarios, and other real-life experiences to provide an experiential base upon which to understand new concepts.

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When learning with technology, students are more motivated, complete defined education objectives more quickly, and produce positive results on standardized tests.

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By actively involving the learner in the learning process, the quality teacher improves the likelihood that a concept will be understood. This differs from many traditional practices, where the instruction is purely theoretical, abstracted from anything meaningful to the student.

Career Academies

The value of relevant, contextual learning is demonstrated by research into the impact of career academies on student graduation rates and achievement. In the most successful academies, instruction is aligned to the interests of students. This student-centered approach has had positive results.

One research report stated, “The findings from this evaluation show that the Career Academies substantially reduced dropout rates and substantially improved a variety of measures of school engagement among students in the high-risk subgroup.”⁵⁹

The Department of Education reported that students in career academies dropped out of high school at a lower rate (3.1%) than the rate at comprehensive high schools (3.9%).⁶⁰ “In addition to enhancing enrollment, retention and completion rates, the evidence suggests that career academies positively influence school climate and motivation.”⁶¹

Technology-Based Learning

Research also tells us that the use of technology for instruction makes learning more relevant for today’s youth. The NCES *Report on School Quality* reported that, “student learning is enhanced by computers when the computer is used to teach discreet skills.”⁶² When learning with technology, students are more motivated, complete defined education objectives more quickly, and produce positive results on standardized tests.⁶³

The U.S. Department of Education recognized the relevance of technology-based learning in January 2005, with the release of its *National Education Technology Plan*.⁶⁴ This plan examines how technology can be used to improve the instructional environment of schools. It recognizes that today’s students are, “an amazing generation of students weaned on the marvels of technology who are literally forcing our schools to adapt and change in ways never before imagined.”⁶⁵

The technology plan recommends seven major action steps and recommendations, including support for e-learning and virtual schools, a movement towards more digital content, and improved teacher training.⁶⁶ Their message is clear: to reach the 21st century student, we must incorporate the use of technology and it must be

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The sign of a healthy 21st century school is that there are many different ways for a student to achieve a regular high school diploma.

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as invisible as a ballpoint pen. The technical platform is the most relevant learning platform for a great number of students.

A quality graduation rate improvement program will feature various forms of relevant and active learning activities, where the learner is actively engaged in the learning process. These activities include career academies, e-learning, labs, project learning, digital tools, real-life academic activities, issues and ethics discussions, peer instruction, and community-assisted learning.

1c. Alternative Learning Programs

The diversity and changing nature of the 21st century Western culture requires that a school provide more than a ‘one-size-fits-all’ academic format. An inflexible system may have been effective in an earlier time. Today, it cannot meaningfully serve the diversity of circumstances from which students come to school.

Strategic educational practice for dealing with a diversity of needs must shift from adapting standards in a common system to adapting the system to achieve common standards for every student.

The sign of a healthy 21st century school is that there are many different ways for a student to achieve a regular high school diploma. Effective implementation of alternative strategies requires that schools demolish all remnants of the 20th century ‘bell curve mentality,’ where statistically appropriate numbers of failing students are required to maintain some illusion of ‘academic rigor.’ This is a bold and exciting new direction for education.

Key Elements of Alternative Learning

The very nature of alternative education makes it difficult to quantify. Each program is designed to cater to the unique needs of the individuals it is designed to serve.

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory identified some of the common characteristics found in successful alternative education programs⁶⁷, including:

- choice in involvement
- focus on the whole student
- warm, caring relationships
- expanded teacher roles
- sense of community
- high student expectations
- small size
- relative autonomy
- relevant education

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In almost every way, alternative education defines itself with the same attributes being proposed for improvement and reform to the entire high school system.

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- individual counseling
- safe environment
- innovative teaching strategies
- schools that are connected to families and the community

Individualized Instruction

Individualized learning has demonstrated some great successes with students whose lifestyle or personality is suited to learning at their own pace.

The Association of California State Administrators recommends individualized learning, especially that which, “includes diagnostic tests to determine specific gaps in learning; materials at the appropriate ability and age level, keyed to filling in gaps in student learning (often including self-paced, computer-assisted instruction); and the flexibility to allow students to work at their own pace.”⁶⁸ At-risk students destined to leave school are more likely to graduate from programs with individualized instruction.

The *City-as-School Program* (CAS) in Buffalo, New York, a program for at-risk students, has had 65% of their students earn regular high school diplomas. The *Free Options* program at the Borough Academies in New York City has achieved a graduation rate of 86% with those same more challenging students.⁶⁹ Individualized learning can be effective for those achieving average grades as well.

A recent SREB *High Schools That Work* research summary recommended that schools identify students in 11th grade who plan to pursue post-secondary education but lack the qualifications to get there. They advise the arrangement of individual learning opportunities that upgrade student readiness for college placement tests.”⁷⁰ No matter what the focus, individualized learning programs provide unique adaptations that enable more students to achieve and graduate on time.

In almost every way, alternative education defines itself with the same attributes being proposed for improvement and reform to the entire high school system. When the attributes of successful alternative education someday become the core attributes of the entire system, alternative education will have to go looking for a new name.

Academic connectedness is the most obvious strategy for encouraging a student to graduate on time. The research to support the value of socially connecting a child to school is presented in the next section of this paper.

Social Connections

Theme 2: Social Connections

By the time they reach high school, 40% to 60% of students become “chronically disengaged from school.”⁷¹ The majority of modern research on effectively engaging students with school places its focus on the social connection. Recognizing that academic reform may be more a challenging path for change in high schools, researchers have looked to foster and evaluate the ‘social capital’ that students develop. There are strong signs that a social connection to school can contribute to improved graduation rate and student achievement. Four types of social connection strategies for graduation rate improvement are reviewed below.

2a. Smaller Schools

A large school is like a large city. It has more options, but it is less personal, less welcoming, and more lonely than a smaller school. Similarly, small towns and small schools are quite similar. More people know who you are, people are friendlier, and you feel more a part of a community, especially when you are new to the place.

For students that have not experienced success in elementary or middle school, it is particularly important that the transition to high school is an entry to a welcome new community. This is much more difficult to achieve in a bigger school.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation compiled a comprehensive collection of research that supports the benefits of smaller schools for improving both graduation rates and various achievement gaps.⁷² It references studies like the *Coalition Campus Schools Project* in New York City, one designed to create smaller, new model schools. These schools produced, “better attendance, lower incident rates, better performance on reading and writing assignments, higher graduation rates, and higher college-going rates than the previous school, despite serving a more educationally disadvantaged population of students.”⁷³

“Numerous other studies have shown the impact of small learning communities on achievement and youth development.”⁷⁴ This includes the American Association of School Administrators, who recognized that, “the ‘holding power’ of small schools is considerably greater than that of large schools.”⁷⁵

Reducing the size of the school does not, in its own right, impact graduation rate improvement. Being smaller means nothing if the number of meaningful student/system interactions does not increase. The benefit of a smaller sized school must be leveraged by other program features, including improved student-teacher connections, strong peer relations and increased connectivity between the school and home.



By the time they reach high school, 40% - 60% of students become “chronically disengaged from school.”





Closer teacher-student relationships appear to result in increased student engagement in school, improved school attendance and retention, and increased student interaction.



2b. Student- Teacher Connections

All meaningful relationships begin with shared experiences. Relationships grow stronger and more meaningful in a consistent and dignified environment of respect, equity and trust. Relationships diminish in abusive, neglectful or inconsistent environments. In quality relationships, both people contribute and receive their ‘props’ that are the foundation for growth in every relationship. This is as true in school as it is in life.

Everyone has an opinion about school. These opinions are grounded in the quality of their own high school experience. When people talk positively or negatively about the system, it is not the system or the academic content they talk about. They talk about their teachers and the way they behaved.

Ample research and advisement illustrates that when teachers create structured and respectful learning environments in their classrooms, more students achieve and graduate on time. The Department of Education’s report, *‘New American High Schools’*, stated, “closer teacher-student relationships appear to result in increased student engagement in school, improved school attendance and retention, and increased student interaction among those from different ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds.”⁷⁶

The NASSP *‘Breaking Ranks II’* report identified seven ‘cornerstone strategies’ for improved student performance. The strategy, entitled ‘Connections With Students’ proposed that schools, “increase the quantity and improve the quality of interactions between students, teachers and other school personnel” with such tactics as, “a ‘personal adult advocate’ for every student, a ‘personal plan for progress’ that is regularly reviewed with their advocate, and a clearly conveyed sense of caring from every teacher.”⁷⁷

Benefits of improved teacher-student relations are not confined to high school. Students who have quality middle school relationships with teachers are more likely to transition well to high school. As reported in a *‘High Schools That Work’* research, “teachers matter enormously; middle grades students who have teachers as advisors are more likely to have educational goals and plans for high school.”⁷⁸

In a caring learning environment, each student knows that someone is paying attention to their performance in school. Conversely, “A perceived lack of respect from peers and adults alienates and marginalizes students.”⁷⁹ School leaders intent on increasing graduation rates would be wise to take full advantage of the teacher-student relationship research and guidance. Improvements to the engaging nature of every classroom, however, will require a continuous commitment of resources for ongoing teacher training and support.



The investment of time and money into optional... after-school programs appears to contribute meaningfully to student achievement and graduation rates.



After-School Connections

Many meaningful teacher-student connections are established outside the classroom, where adults work with smaller groups of students in teams, clubs, and support programs. Three types of programs are typically outlined in the research:

- Homework assistance programs
- Teams and clubs
- Child day care

A recent report on California's after-school programs found many positive impacts on students. "Participating students demonstrated increased achievement, regular attendance, good behavior, and a reduction in grade retention. Students also showed improved social skills and behavior which resulted in fewer disciplinary incidents at school and fewer suspensions."⁸⁰

Interestingly, these programs also proved cost efficient. "There was a 53.4% decrease in retention in the primary grades associated with the program. The cost savings to the state as a result of the decrease in student retention ... are projected at more than \$11 million."⁸¹ The investment of time and money into optional interest, support, or care-oriented after-school programs appears to contribute meaningfully to student achievement and graduation rates.

2c. Peer Connections

A Brown University report on *'Student-Centered High Schools'* reported that the "student 'connection' to the school is the most salient protective factor against 'acting out' behaviors, and students who feel a part of the life of school are more likely to stay in school and maintain good grades and good attendance."⁸² 'Feeling a part of school life' is a vital strategy for connecting every student to school. Two primary factors drive peer connections to school life — the student's sense of safety and the student's sense of belonging with other students.

A Student's Sense of Safety

School safety has become a much higher profile issue in the past decade, as a result of several horrific tragedies. Whereas violent crime makes the headlines, it is the endless bullying or alienating behaviors that have the greater effect on graduation rate. Every day, 160,000 children fearful of being bullied stay home from school, according to the National Association of School Psychologists.⁸³ They add that, "bullying is the most common form of violence in our society; between 15% and 30% of students are bullies or victims."⁸⁴ Their research indicates that, "membership in either bully or victim groups is associated with school drop out, poor psychosocial adjustment, criminal activity and other negative long-term consequences."⁸⁵



Social alienation from school-based peers.... both contributed to poor school performance and increased the risk of dropping out of school.



Many organizations have targeted safe schools as part of their graduation rate improvement recommendations. The National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University identified ‘safe schools’ as one of 15 “effective strategies”. “Students dropout of school for many reasons,” the Center states, “but violence and conflict are contributing factors to placing students at-risk.”⁸⁶

One clear method for improving graduation rates is to establish the disciplinary, instructional and communication structures to promote safe schools. The National Resource Center for Safe Schools recommends several interventions, beginning with simply having adults speak up. 71% of students reported that teachers ignored bullying, assuming it was just part of growing up.⁸⁷ Other interventions suggested include teaching conflict resolution and assertiveness training, peer counseling, and improvement of the physical school building to improve supervision.⁸⁸

A Student’s Sense of Belonging

In addition to feeling safe, students are more likely to feel an affinity to school if they feel welcomed by their peers. Any students with poor peer relationships, who also lack the ability to readily make new friendships, are at high risk for academic difficulties at all levels of schooling.⁸⁹ The *Journal of Educational Research* reported that social alienation from school-based peers and relationships with low-performing peers in middle school both contributed to poor school performance and increased the risk of dropping out of school.⁹⁰

A National Association of School Psychologists study found that, “a student who perceives a strong, positive relationship with his peers is more likely to actively engage in classroom activities than a student who feels alienated from his peers.”⁹¹ Success begins by giving students the opportunity to experience belonging and contributing to a positive peer group.⁹²

The practice of grade retention disconnects students from the groups in which they belong. Dropout prevention experts state that, “virtually all the empirical studies to date suggest that retention (retaining a student in a grade for a second consecutive year), even in lower elementary grades, significantly increases the likelihood of dropping out.”⁹³ Grade retention decisions must be made within the context of their tendency to disconnect kids from school.

Peer programs have successfully enabled students to connect with other students. Students are trained to provide a variety of one-on-one helping roles, expanding their own relationship skills. Peer counselors, peer tutors, peer mediators, peer mentors, peer planners – in each case, students proactively play a role to establish more meaningful connections between students and school. This is another effective strategy for connecting students with school.

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Only one-third of teachers agreed strongly that parents supported them in their efforts to educate their children.

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Evidence shows that improving the social connections of students to school enables more students to graduate on time. Student engagement can be made even stronger if family members also establish relations with the school.

2d. School/Family Connections

Engaging parents with their child’s school has been the ‘Holy Grail’ for many middle and high school leaders. Everyone knows the incredible value of engaging a student’s family member with the school. According to many studies, including a 1996 Department of Education report, “parent involvement in children’s education has been linked to children’s achievement and academic standing.”⁹⁴ The more a parent is involved, the better it is for their child, at any age.⁹⁵

Many school leaders will tell you, however, that the goal of family involvement seems impossible to attain. “Only one-third of teachers agreed strongly that parents supported them in their efforts to educate their children.”⁹⁶ While some educational leaders search the landscape of ideas for ways to get more parental involvement in school, others wonder if the parents of older students will ever make the success of their child’s education a priority.

The good news is that, “a growing body of research shows that school practices to involve parents are strong predictors of parental involvement.”⁹⁷ Parents who receive frequent school requests for active involvement in their child’s education report higher levels of home and school engagement.⁹⁸

Many types of activities fall into the category of family involvement. These include attending parent-teacher conferences, establishing study space and disciplines at home, modeling educational behavior (reading, for example), organizing tutoring, volunteering at the school, joining parent associations, and always speaking positively about school in front of their children.⁹⁹

The most effective form of parent involvement is the work they do with their children on learning activities at home.¹⁰⁰ The National Education Association cites research that states:

“The most accurate predictor of a student’s achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student’s family is able to:

- Create a home environment that encourages learning
- Express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children’s achievement and future careers
- Become involved in their children’s education at school and in the community.”¹⁰¹

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Sometimes it is just one meaningful connection that makes the difference between a student leaving or staying in school.

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One of the most successful strategies initiated by middle and high schools has been to involve the student, parent and counselor in high school and post-secondary planning. Whereas the academic content of school may have moved beyond where a parent feels they can be helpful, there is a lot a parent can do to help with their child's career and educational development.

In one study of schools successful in both grad rate and test score improvement, a meeting of parents, educators and students was cited as a key success strategy. The meeting was held with the families of future 9th grade students, to “orient both parent and student to what the student must do to succeed in high school, and to plan how the school and parent can support the student.”¹⁰²

Engaging parents to be supportive of their child's aspirations - whatever they may be - has proven an effective way to help children develop some sense of possibility for their future.

In so many ways, it really does take a community to teach a child. **The more positive social connections a student and their family makes with different teachers, coaches, peer leaders and other adults and students, the more likely it is that she or he will stay in school and graduate on time.** These connections can be made for any student at any age from any kind of background. Sometimes it is just one meaningful connection that makes the difference between a student leaving or staying in school.

Self-Managed Connections

Theme 3: Self-Managed Connections

The education system has dedicated many years developing ‘external motivators’ of students. These motivators include academic standards, comparative grading structures, student support services, disciplinary practices, instructional practices, alternative pathways, parent/school communications, and a variety of other incentives, all designed to externally motivate a student to learn and achieve. Despite our best efforts at inspiring students to do their best, 32% of students entering 9th grade fail to graduate on time and an additional 50% of them do not finish their post-secondary program within 150% of the expected time for completion.¹⁰³

In almost every case, student failure in educational completion is more a motivational issue than an issue of adequate skills. Very little attention has been paid to fostering the internal motivations of learners as a strategy for graduation rate improvement. Whereas academic and social initiatives for connecting kids to school have good promise, **we believe the greatest and quickest gains in graduation rate improvement will come from initiatives focused on engaging the internal motivations of students. We must train young people to create their own meaning in school.**

Every student must have a clearly defined and meaningful future plan. That plan must be an extension of the person the student wants to become. By focusing on connecting the student to something meaningful beyond school, the pathway of school takes on greater meaning. This future purpose could be work, education, leisure, or lifestyle related. It must be something the student has discovered that inspires them to become more actively engaged in school.

As the student grows and changes, so will the plan. Therefore schools must also train students in a variety of self-management skills that are vital for maintaining health and happiness in a world of multiple career transitions and lifelong learning.

There are three major strategies for connecting a student to their future. An outcome-based, 6th- through 12th-grade student planning and self-management program is required to inspire motivation and teach skills that enable a student to explore, plan and achieve a fulfilling and sustainable lifestyle. A quality community-assisted program must be in place to allow students to explore and experience possible futures beyond the borders of school. Individual career/educational counseling services must be present to assist students as they plan their transition from middle to high school, and from high school to something else. Together, these three strategies can enable every student to create their own unique connection to education.



Student failure in educational completion is more a motivational issue than an issue of adequate skills.





Adolescents with a purposeful orientation towards life have ... greater educational and occupational achievements by midlife.



3a. Sequenced Planning/Self-Management Discipline of Study

An astounding research paper was recently published by Florida State University, entitled, *'Does Being Planful Always Pay Off?'* Researchers examined data from the *National Longitudinal Survey of Youth*¹⁰⁴, a national random sampling of 12,686 individuals who were 14 to 22 years of age in 1979. These individuals were interviewed annually from 1979 to 1994, and have been interviewed every two years since. The FSU study sampled 1,816 of these individuals who were 16 to 18 years old or a dropout in 1979. Their research provides the most compelling reason for teaching planning and self-management skills to youth.

Their research found that, “‘planful competence’ is a powerful predictor of an adolescent’s plans and their adult achievement in schooling and work.”¹⁰⁵ The study defines ‘planful competence’ as a combination of ‘sense of mastery’ (a belief in yourself), ‘knowledge about the broader world of work’ (expanded career awareness), ‘scholastic aptitude’ (the skills), and ‘plans about the timing and extent of future attainment’ (defined intent).

The paper goes on to state, “Adolescents with a purposeful orientation towards life, combined with general and practical knowledge, have more ambitious career plans, more stable plans in young adulthood, and greater educational and occupational achievements by midlife.”¹⁰⁶

These are ground-shaking results that prove what many have always believed. Individuals who have a clear purpose for their future, and the belief that they can proactively realize that future, are more successful in both their educational and occupational attainment. The study also found that students demonstrating ‘planful competence’, “ultimately yields greater achievements in work and schooling... above and beyond the influences of class, race/ethnicity, and gender.”¹⁰⁷ No matter what your perceived limitation, the skills and attitudes of ‘planful competence’ can take you through. These skills or attitudes can be taught and modeled for any young learner.

Although the FSU research is the most impressive research we discovered that illustrates tangible value from planning and self-management instruction, there are many additional support papers. The American School Counselor Association’s *'National Model'* encourages counselors to “switch their emphasis from service-centered for some of the students to program-centered for every student.”¹⁰⁸ The ASCA Model recommends the integration of a structured and developmental guidance curriculum with individual student planning services, responsive services and system support.



Young adults admit to spending little time in career planning either during or after high school and often end up in their current jobs haphazardly.



In a review of all career development research from 2002, *Career Development Quarterly* researchers advised that career educators should expand beyond their traditional individual focus to include group instruction, work-based learning, and student support, when helping prepare students for life transitions.¹⁰⁹

A Professional School Counseling study concluded that, “students who have information about graduation requirements and career options are more likely to have higher aspirations and are less likely to fail.”¹¹⁰ The evidence supports the development of an outcome-based 6th- to 12th-grade planning and self-management skills instructional framework as a support for grad rate improvement.

Developing the internal motivations of all students is a new concept for most school districts. The FSU study states that, “contemporary research has found that young adults admit to spending little time in career planning either during or after high school and often end up in their current jobs haphazardly.”¹¹¹ As a result, high school seniors “who had demonstrated through high standardized test scores potential for achieving their educational aspirations, over half had experienced ‘lost talent’ in the six years following graduation.”¹¹² A *‘High Schools That Work’* study found that, “about half of 8th grade students who expect to graduate from college are not enrolled in college preparatory mathematics courses they need.”¹¹³

It will be difficult to drive meaningful grad rate improvement, without the effective implementation of a quality 6th- to 12th-grade planning and self-management program.

Teaching a Discipline of Planning and Self-Management Skills

Fortunately, it is not difficult to teach planning and self-management skills. A quality program teaches three types of skills:

- Explore — skills for exploration, motivation development
- Plan — skills for fulfillment, sustainability and action planning
- Achieve — skills for realizing defined plans

Exploration is the motivational foundation for planning. It includes the teaching of self-assessment and work/life research skills, ideally introduced in 6th grade and updated annually to the end of the senior year. Knowledge of a student’s motivations is useful in course selection, making academic studies more relevant, student discipline, parent conferences, and student engagement with school.

Planning skills enable individuals to create focus on the achievement of meaningful possible futures. Ideally introduced in the 8th grade (high school planning) and updated annually, planning curricula teach skills for decision-making, fulfillment



By encouraging students to see themselves as ‘portfolio learners,’ . . . they shift their focus from present-day reactive concerns to future proactive possibilities.



planning, sustainability planning, post-secondary planning, balanced work/life planning, and some introductory business planning.

Finally, a scoped and sequenced discipline of study would teach students a variety of self-management skills, including financial management, time/stress management, written presentation skills, spoken presentation skills, test-taking skills, e-application skills, job search, and personal portfolio management. Ideally, these skills are introduced in 10th grade, with select curricular components being updated annually. **Districts must develop scoped and sequenced frameworks designed to deliver and assess student development of planning and self-management skills.**

Portfolio Learners

A key component of planning and self-management instruction is the ongoing development of a ‘professional portfolio’. This digital or paper-based resource cumulates over time the emerging professional attributes of an individual. Four key types of attributes are gathered in a portfolio – skills, credentials, experiences and personal networks. The portfolio also keeps track of student self-assessments, work/life research, educational plans, and balanced work/life plans.

By encouraging students to see themselves as ‘portfolio learners,’ intent on continuously gathering marketable skills, credentials, experiences and personal networks as they move through educational and work settings, they shift their focus from present-day reactive concerns to future proactive possibilities.

There is research to support the power of meaningful portfolio development for enabling students. The *ERIC Digest* describes an “assets approach” to youth, where they, “are seen as having resources rather than deficits. Research demonstrates that children with more assets, or social capital, are less likely to engage in risky behavior.”¹¹⁴ The U.S. Department of Education suggests that portfolios, “are used to assess multiple outcomes and activities and have the added benefits of improving curriculum, helping students get jobs, and improving employability skills.”¹¹⁵

The development of professional portfolios for youth, the positioning of students as ‘portfolio learners’, and the integration of portfolios as the connecting tool between grades in a well designed, scoped and sequenced 6th- to 12th-grade planning and self-management program, is a vital strategy in the quest to keep more kids in school.

It seems obvious that a student who sees something meaningful they wish to achieve beyond high school is more likely to stay in school to pursue that goal. Conversely, students will withdraw from school if there is no authentic connection to their own aspirations.¹¹⁶ Programs designed to help more students discover and develop future



Schools have the opportunity to assure that a diversity of human experience is not the exclusive domain of those who can afford it.



interests are key contributors to graduation rate improvement. This discovery can happen in a classroom or through meaningful community experiences.

3b. Community-Assisted Learning

The discovery of meaningful possible futures occurs most frequently in the midst of ongoing human experience. Individuals with a greater diversity of life experiences have an advantage over those whose experience has been limited to their family life and the abstract experiences of television and the Internet.

How can you know you would love to be a marine biologist if you have never explored a tidal pool? How can you know you can't wait to study early childhood education if you've never helped a child? What would inspire you to pursue your first marathon if you hadn't run further than what's required to catch a bus? All real connections with a possible future happen in the act of being in the presence of some aspect of that activity.

That same new experience provides a broader baseline for new learning to occur. Schools have the opportunity to assure that a diversity of human experience is not the exclusive domain of those who can afford it. This is the promise of well-organized community-assisted learning.

Components of Community-Assisted Learning

Community assisted learning is simply the inclusion of community in the education of a child. There are four primary components to a comprehensive community-assisted learning program: preparation, school-to-community experiences, community-to-school experiences, and reflection.

Before students experience learning through contact with the community, quality preparation is required. Preparation involves some pre-learning about the specific community experience, question preparation, and, if leaving the school premises, some permissions and safeguards to assure the students are safe during their community experience.

Somebody has to visit someone else in community-assisted learning. Either the students go to the community or the community comes to the students. School-to-community programs include classroom activities like field trips or project learning, and individual experiences, like job-shadowing, work experience, cooperative education, apprenticeships, and service learning.

Community-to-school programs usually involve presentations, as provided by guest speakers, college forums, and career days. However, some individual help is also provided by the community, in tutoring, mentoring, or special assistance roles. In every case, these



School-community collaboration causes improved reading and math performance, better attendance rates, a decrease in suspension rates and a decrease in the dropout rate.



programs bring a wider range of experience and perspectives to the student's life. These experiences provide a fertile ground for learning and the development of possible futures.

The fourth component of community-assisted learning is the one most often forgotten – personal reflection. No human experience is necessarily educational. The learner must create personal meaning by reflecting on experience. Any program intent on developing self-management skills must mandate the process of creating personal meaning from all learning opportunities. This can be done in the form of a report, a spoken summary, a journal entry, or a multi-media presentation.

A variety of tools are being used by schools to help students plan and self-manage their high school productivity and post-secondary intentions. College calendars, individual counseling, computerized career information tools, and assessment tools are used in over 92% of schools.¹¹⁷ More than 73% of schools offer work experience, job shadowing, career days, guest speakers, field trips, group guidance sessions, and training in job-seeking skills.¹¹⁸ Although not every school offers community-assisted learning to every student, schools have been very proactive in their development of learning opportunities outside the regular classroom.

There is ample evidence to demonstrate the positive impact of community-assisted learning. Most of it was generated during the mid-1990s, when 'School-to-Work' funds were in abundance.

The best summary of this research is the Columbia University report, *'School-to-Work – Making A Difference in Education'*. It summarizes much of the 1990s research, highlighting multiple studies that demonstrate the positive effects of community-assisted learning on most strategic aspects of school improvement, including academic achievement, keeping high risk kids in school, graduation rates, student goal development, college readiness, workplace readiness, school appreciation, and community appreciation of school.¹¹⁹ According to this research summary, the only significant goal of education that is not positively impacted by community-assisted learning is the improvement of scores on high stakes tests.

Many other reports illustrate the benefits of community-assisted learning on graduation rate improvement. The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) has identified 15 'effective strategies' for improving graduation rates. One key strategy is 'School-Community Collaboration', deemed to cause, "improved reading and math performance, better attendance rates, a decrease in suspension rates and a decrease in the dropout rate."¹²⁰ The *'High Schools That Work'* initiative has found that, "High risk students are eight to 10 times less likely to drop out in the 11th and 12th grades if they enroll in a career/technical program."¹²¹



It is a very positive sign that the national associations for high school principals and counselors both recommend a greater emphasis on individual assistance.



Establishing a meaningful connection between students and the community is a useful strategy for graduation rate improvement.

3c. Individualized Career/Educational Counseling

The National Association of Secondary School Principals advisory report, entitled, *‘Breaking Ranks II – Strategies for Leading High School Reform’*, features seven ‘cornerstone strategies’ for improved student performance. The third strategy is ‘Personalized Planning’ and it recommends that high schools, “implement a comprehensive advisory program that ensures each student has frequent and meaningful opportunities to plan and assess his or her academic and social progress with a faculty member.”¹²²

This advice is supported by the American School Counselor Association, whose *‘National Model’*, defines the new role of school counseling as “partners in student achievement.”¹²³ They encourage counselors to take responsibility for providing, “ongoing systemic activities designed to assist students individually in establishing personal goals and developing future plans.”¹²⁴

It is a very positive sign that the national associations for high school principals and counselors both recommend a greater emphasis on individual assistance to support each student’s educational and career development.

It seems there is support in the schools as well. Most school counseling programs surveyed in 2002 (48%) see their primary role as “helping students with their academic achievement.” This is a significant increase from 18 years earlier, when 35% of programs saw academic achievement as their primary role. Fewer schools (26%) identified “helping students plan and prepare for post-secondary schooling” as their primary goal.¹²⁵

As the emphasis in schools has shifted towards school achievement, more counselors see themselves playing a key role in academic achievement and graduation rate improvement.

Many studies and reports have found value in counselor-driven individual career and educational planning services. The Department of Education’s report, *‘New American High Schools’*, states that, “according to many studies, most students look to their counselors, rather than other adults in their lives, for career advice and guidance...84% of surveyed students would seek out their high school counselors for information about career opportunities, 69%... for career decisions, and 62%... for assistance with job hunting.”¹²⁶

A *‘High Schools That Work’* research study identified “redesigned guidance and advisement systems to ensure students have goals for the future and plans for achieving those goals” as a key tactic employed to enable researched schools to concurrently increase student test scores and graduation rates.¹²⁷ Another report indicated high value for schools, “providing a mentor to assist each student and his or her family in exploring and setting post-high school goals, developing a challenging program of study aligned to those goals, and reviewing progress at least annually.”¹²⁸

In a world of so many choices, too few students are choosing a meaningful path. Without a sense of direction or purpose for school, many students elect to not complete their graduation on time. Schools can improve all that, by combining an outcome-based, 6th- to 12th-grade planning and self-management skill development program with community-assisted learning opportunities and quality individual counseling and advisement. The skills learned in such a program will not only improve school graduation rates, they will provide students with educational and work transition management capabilities they will use for a lifetime.



A quality program is the result of the drive, talents, and determination of a few purposeful people.



Graduation Rate Improvement Program Management

All the evidence in the world cannot deliver a quality program that makes a difference. In every case, a quality program is the result of the drive, talents, and determination of a few purposeful people. These leaders of change articulate a vision for how they would prefer things to be. They define a comprehensive plan for moving an organization from where it is to where they want it to go. A qualified team of individuals is identified and given authority for clearly defined responsibilities in the project. That team is resourced, continuously trained, and kept well informed about what's working and what's not throughout the change implementation. This is the essential work of good leaders.

Graduation rate improvement has been mandated as a focus for educational leaders of American high schools. A summary of research that defines best practices has been provided in this paper. However, for an educational leader to be successful in achieving grad rate improvement, they must practice the principles of quality leadership.

These leadership principles have been organized into four key attributes of graduation rate improvement program management:

- 1) Commitment, Vision and Program Goals
- 2) Leadership Team
- 3) Implementation Team
- 4) Accountability and Communication Systems

Meaningful change happens when a quality executive leader elects to make change a priority. That change leader will not be effective unless modern principles of good leadership are practiced. Key principles and attributes of a well-managed grad rate improvement program are outlined in the following section of this paper. This model for effective change management has been primarily influenced by the research of Michael Fullan. An introduction to some of his research, *'The Three Stories of Educational Reform'*, is referenced here.¹²⁹

1) Commitment, Vision and Program Goals

The executive educational leader interested in graduation rate improvement must develop their own commitment, project vision and program goals before communicating with the rest of the district or school. This enables the leader to establish and quantify her or his personal resolve and purpose for the project. A committed and purposeful leader establishes a clear foundation for the future direction of any project. Their own clarity makes it more likely the program will be implemented as intended.



We have all experienced ‘wishful leaders’ who would like things to be different, but are unwilling to reallocate time and financial resources to meet desired goals.



Commitment

Any successful program must be a priority for the executive educational leader and they must be willing to dedicate available resources to its success. We have all experienced ‘wishful leaders’ who would like things to be different, but are unwilling to do the tough work required to reallocate time and financial resources to meet desired goals. Before any leader steps into the world of meaningful graduation rate improvement, they must know where that topic sits on their list of priorities. If it isn’t in the top three district/school priorities, the leader is probably not willing to invest the resources to truly achieve the desired change.

Project Vision

Executive educational leaders committed to graduation rate improvement must articulate an easy-to-present, easy-to-support vision for the project. The vision does not need to be measurable, rather it should use language designed to inspire others to support the project. It should reference funding available to schools for desired outcomes. A sample vision would be:

The ‘Graduation Rate Improvement Program’ seeks to meaningfully connect more students to our district schools by engaging them through academic, social, and self-managed initiatives.

This program will provide additional school funds to middle schools implementing well-researched new programs that enable more students to pass required courses on time, improved parent involvement in their child’s education, and/or more students to successfully transition to high school.

The program will provide additional school funds to high schools implementing well-researched new programs that enable more students to pass required courses on time, improved parent involvement in their child’s education, more students to create meaningful post-secondary plans, and/or improved regular diploma graduation rates.

All program proposals must include a commitment of funds for ongoing professional development of all teachers involved.

Executives must be willing to allocate funds according to excellence, not democracy. In other words, funds to support the project vision should be allocated exclusively to those committed to making meaningful systemic change. Every school has the right to not receive variable funds.



An executive educational leader must assemble a quality Leadership Team who is charged with the design and implementation of the program plan.



Program Goals

The executive leader must articulate easy to understand and measurable goals relating to graduation rate improvement in their district or school. These goals define what will be measured in accountability systems. Sample goals would be:

- a) *More than 90% of students in each grade in each school will pass their required courses on time.*
- b) *95% of students transitioning each year from middle school to 9th grade will still be enrolled two years after high school entry (excluding known district transfers)*
- c) *More than 90% of 10th grade students in June 2007 will have at least one meaningful future plan.*
- d) *85% of students entering 9th grade in September 2005 will graduate on the regular diploma program (excluding known district transfers)*
- e) *80% of middle school parents, and 50% of high school parents, will have had at least three meaningful interactions with their child's school in each of the next five years.*

These program goals should always be presented within a context of the present position. For example, in the example above, imagine the district seeking an 85% cohort graduation rate has a present-day grad rate of 76%.

2) The Leadership Team

An executive educational leader must assemble a quality Leadership Team who is charged with the design and implementation of the program plan. This team begins with a representative from every school or department, with full knowledge that some will leave due to lack of interest or capability. The team will also include a data management specialist, responsible for collecting key management data. Other team members could include representatives from each school's parent committee, community members and student representatives. These types of individuals are only included if they will play an active role in the implementation of the plan.

In the initial phases, the leadership team is responsible for program design and plan development. It is during this phase that the implementation team is identified and clear roles are assigned. Once funding is allocated, this team assumes quarterly responsibility for data review and analysis, the sharing of best practices, and the continuous development of the project plan, as guided by ongoing accountability.

It is recommended that the executive educational leader chair the quarterly meetings of the leadership team. This brings great credibility and value to the project. It is also recommended that the executive leader assume no role in implementation, delegating all those responsibilities to other members of the leadership team.

“

The selection of “a few good people” to implement project plans is vitally important.

”

3) The Implementation Team

The success and failure of any project is most influenced by quality tactical plan implementation. The selection of “a few good people” to implement project plans is vitally important. The leadership team must avoid being excessively democratic, as inclusiveness can water down the quality of the intervention, especially in the first few years. New changes are always subjected to additional scrutiny. The executive leader and the leadership team must place a high priority on careful selection of their implementation team.

Once the implementation team has been determined, leaders must “stay out of the kitchen,” delegating tactical decision-making to that team. If leaders have chosen your team wisely, you can trust accountability measures (not micro-management) to be your governing tool. It is also vital that the leadership team adequately resource, train, and communicate with your tactical team. One of the most frustrating things for natural implementers is to be given responsibility for important changes with no meaningful trust and support from the people they are trying to serve.

There is one implementation strategy that is often poorly considered in effective change management – quality professional development. Without good and continuous training, educators and others involved in the change are left to their traditional practices and resources. Almost every comprehensive research of leadership report we reviewed for this paper recommended a more modern form of professional development to support desired change, including:

- a) **National Association of Secondary School Principals** – *Breaking Ranks II*: “Align comprehensive ongoing professional development and Individual Personal Learning Plans of staff members with the content knowledge and instructional strategies required to prepare students for graduation.”¹³⁰
- b) **The U.S. Department of Education** – *New American High Schools*: “Traditional approaches to professional development no longer seem adequate to the task of keeping teachers informed and up-to-date on the rapid changes taking place in secondary education....Effective professional development...is continuous and closely monitored...few people can apply what they have learned in a professional development activity...without ongoing assistance.”¹³¹
- c) **National Center on Educational Statistics**: “Research suggests that unless professional development programs are carefully designed and implemented to provide continuity between what teachers learn and what goes on in their classrooms and schools, these activities are not likely to produce any long-lasting effects on either teacher competence or student outcomes.”¹³²



Without continuous accountability, the world moves on while static programs fall further and further behind.



The Council for School Performance has identified four characteristics of a professional development program that would accompany a significant intervention like graduation rate improvement: “(a) long-term programs embedded in the school year; (b) active learning activities such as demonstration, practice, and feedback; (c) collaborative study of student learning; and (d) administrative support for continuing collaboration to improve teaching and learning.”¹³³ Executive leaders are advised to place emphasis on effective and continuous professional development, to achieve quality returns on program investments.

4) Accountability and Communication Systems

No meaningful project implementation is an event. Change management is a learning process, where leaders continuously gather program information for the purpose of learning what works and what does not. Traditionally, accountability systems have been used in a summative way, comparing students, programs or schools at the end of some measurable period of time.

In quality change management, accountability systems are formative in nature, cumulating data that enables program improvement. Data provides the vitality that keeps a program dynamic and developmental. Without continuous accountability, the world moves on while static programs fall further and further behind.

The development and management of accountability systems is the responsibility of the data specialist. This individual establishes systems of measurement on both sides of the ‘cause-and-effect’ equation. Causal data is collected quarterly and reported to the leadership team. It provides ongoing information about the emerging intervention. Best practices are identified from this causal data, and lead practitioners are identified and activated to teach others what they know.

Effect data is collected annually, where the data specialist compares segmented groups of students to key program outcomes (for example, passing rates, transition success rates, graduation rates). This data is provided annually to the leadership team, who disseminate that information to the broader community.

Accountability data must be distributed to the appropriate places to be effective. Data does little sitting on a shelf. Causal data must be distributed in a timely fashion to promote the use of the best practices being discovered. Effect data must be distributed strategically to garner support for the grad rate improvement program.

Timely releases of positive or negative data remind the educational community, families, and the business community that graduation rate is a priority for the leader’s school or district. This is vital for driving a continuous wind into the sails of those charged with making the graduation rate improvement program a success.



We encourage a de-emphasis on the attributes of a student likely to dropout, and increased focus on the engaging nature of schools.



Summary Statement

The *No Child Left Behind Act* is the first American educational mandate that expects all students to attain a regular high school graduation diploma. Its developers are to be commended for recognizing the social and economic changes requiring every student to achieve a regular graduation diploma. The legislation is no toothless tiger, wisely requiring high schools to concurrently improve student test scores and graduation rates.

States can avoid the immediate consequences of failing to achieve minimum standards and adequate yearly progress by using locally-approved standards that are less stringent than NCLB recommends. We regard this as short-sighted, as evidence illustrates the long-term social and economic costs of an adult without a regular high school diploma. We recommend that state educational leaders use the more accurate CPI/NCLB measure for quantifying graduation rate.

Leaders have traditionally placed their focus on ‘dropout prevention,’ offering lower standard graduation pathways with limited long-term value to ‘at-risk youth.’ We encourage a de-emphasis on the attributes of a student likely to dropout, and increased focus on the engaging nature of schools. Let policy-makers deal with statistical tendencies. School and district leaders must organize their programs around ‘graduation rate improvement,’ focusing on eliminating the risky practices of the education system. We commend those leaders committed to offering all students flexible pathways to achieve a high-value set of inflexible graduation standards.

There is ample research supporting graduation rate improvement programs that focus on the connectedness of students with school. Each district must select engagement strategies that meet the unique needs of its entire student population. We recommend that educational leaders design their programs to engage students from three different fronts – academic, social, and self-managed connections. It is our belief that the introduction of a comprehensive planning and self-management program will produce the greatest and quickest return on their resource investment.

Finally, and most significantly, we encourage executive educational leaders of districts and/or schools to begin their graduation rate improvement program planning by evaluating their own level of commitment to the program. If each leader, like us, believes that grad rate is a very strategic focus for driving meaningful change to the school system, we encourage them to follow modern practices of effective change management, including the continuous measurement and adaptation of program attributes and design. It is our belief that all meaningful change in the education system is driven by focused and influential people. We hope that this white paper puts wind in the sails of people seeking to connect more students to school.

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We cannot afford to sustain any program or practice that disengages students from school.

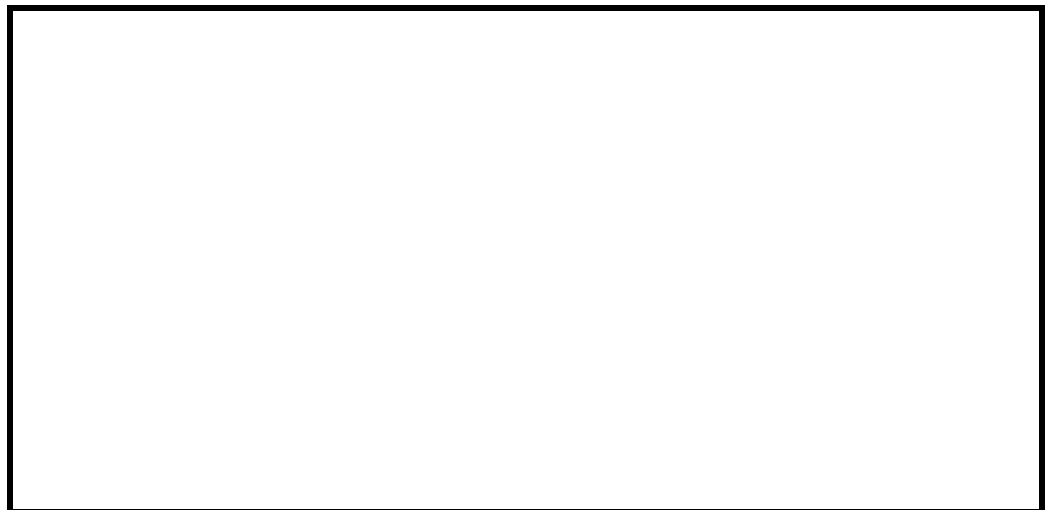
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The authors of *No Child Left Behind* have given us a bold new vision for education in America, one where every student graduates on time with the tools and focus to achieve the future they desire. This vision can be implemented or ignored at any level of the education system, from national leaders to teachers in the classroom.

No matter what each professional does with NCLB, only those programs that prepare all students effectively for modern education and employment should be allowed to stay in school. In the 20th century, we allowed ‘at-risk students’ to vanish from the system. Going forward, we should not be afraid to allow ‘programs that place students at-risk’ to disappear. We cannot afford to sustain any program or practice that disengages students from school.

We encourage professionals at every level to embrace the concept of leaving no child behind, even if some aspects of its design run contrary to your preferences. You must support its intent, to adequately prepare every child to plan and self-manage a healthy, fulfilling and sustainable existence in an ever-changing world of multiple transitions and lifelong learning.

As the research shows, the key to school-initiated graduation rate improvement success is ‘Connected Students.’ We encourage every educational professional to make the engagement of students with school your highest priority.



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