

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Understanding Dropout Prevention Practices

Mark Dynarski, Ph.D. • February 2009

Topic: Dropout Prevention

Highlights

- Developing a data system that diagnoses the number and type of students dropping out is an essential component of dropout prevention.
- Targeted interventions for dropout prevention include assigning adult advocates, providing academic supports, and focusing on services that address social and behavior problems.
- Schoolwide reform interventions include personalizing the learning environment and supplying students with postsecondary career options.
- When considering interventions, one must consider a school's context, the scope of the problem, the kinds of problems present in the school, and the reasons why kids drop out.

About the Interviewee

Mark Dynarski is Vice President and Director of Mathematica's Center for Improving Research Evidence. He also directs the What Works Clearinghouse for the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education. He is a nationally recognized expert in econometrics and evaluation methodology, including the design, implementation, and analysis of evaluations of education

programs using random assignment and quasi-experimental designs.

Dynarski focuses on experiments to study the effectiveness of educational and social programs for children and youth and has played a leading role in many of Mathematica's elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and adult education studies. He publishes widely in peer-reviewed journals and is a member of the National Research Council committee on Evaluating Effectiveness of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards certification program. He is also an associate editor of Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis and Effective Education. He has a Ph.D. in economics from the Johns Hopkins University.

Full Transcript

Hello, I'm Mark Dynarski. I'm a Vice-President at Mathematica Policy Research here in Princeton, New Jersey. I'm also the Director of the What Works Clearinghouse, and I was the Chair of a Practice Guide Panel that looked at the dropout prevention problem and tried to recommend practices for educators to use that would be effective in tackling the dropout problem.

Dropping out as a problem has proven to be quite of longstanding duration. It's about a half million kids a year who drop out of school. It has not changed very much in the last 20 to 30 years. The practices break down roughly into three categories. The first is what we think of is a diagnosis phase, which is that schools and educators need to understand how many dropouts they have, how many kids are leaving, why they are leaving.

The practice that we're recommending is that schools and educators should use more of their data systems to develop a better understanding of how many kids are dropping out and also why they are dropping out. The panel really feels that the diagnostic phase here is really essential, that the other five practices essentially start from a good understanding from the data of the size of the problem and the kinds of kids in the school district who are likely to experience it.

Now with respect to the other two categories of practice, we call one a targeted intervention approach and the other one a school-wide approach. These are differentiated by essentially the scale at which we see the intervention being undertaken. A targeted intervention can operate inside a school, focusing on a set of students for whom it's services are being delivered. One is assign an adult advocate for each of the students who are deemed at risk. There is actually very strong evidence about the effectiveness of having an adult advocate. They can intervene at all levels with these kids. They can intervene with their families; they can intervene in the community; they can intervene with other teachers, possibly understanding why students aren't doing well in classes or whether there's been personality disputes or other kinds of impediments to progress.

The second of the targeted intervention practices that the panel recommends is to provide academic enrichment and support. This really has two sub-practices that we saw inside it. One is to provide remediation and support for things like how to take a test, how to study, how to properly set up the kinds

of circumstances that enable young people to tackle their regular academic classwork. The second of the sub-practices under this is to actually try to develop ways for young people to catch up in school if they've fallen behind. The panel recommended that schools take steps to get them to accelerate their progress through school through—such as doubling up on curriculum and the like, so that they can catch up with their age peers, which helps to mitigate the kind of social pressure that young people feel if they are much older than their peers.

The third of the targeted intervention recommendations is to focus on student behavior and on programs and services that can help young people tackle the kinds of issues that come up in social settings of high schools. So, this could be conflict resolution, for example; it could be programs that help to build social skills, that help people learn to interact and respect diversity.

The next two recommendations are more about what we envision for whole-school reform. The first is to personalize the learning environment, and this is in a way an attempt to address large scale, or very large high schools may have—they maybe overcrowded, there may be very large numbers of kids per class. And in these circumstances, young people may feel alienated, just a number, no one really pays any attention to them, no one really is caring whether they are learning or not. For example, team teaching, so two teachers are in the class interacting with young people; it could be it's just smaller class sizes, per se.

The second of the school-wides, the schoolwide intervention strategies, is basically to think about helping students to be more forward-looking in their perspective about what it means to move on to what an educator would call postsecondary outcome. This could be, for example, exposing young people to career opportunities through job shadowing and other kinds of activities—help them see the workplace and help them find an identity of what they might want to do as they grow up. And then also, that for many young people college is, in fact, affordable and presents a great opportunity for furthering their education, and it's certainly going continue to be a big premium in the economy. And so taking them to colleges, helping them talk with counselors, understand that this is possible for them, can be a great motivating force.

None of these practices really stands on their own. They are really designed for schools and educators to look at and say that some of these should be part of strategy. It really depends a lot on the school's context, the size of the problem, the kinds of problems that the kids are facing, and the reasons why they're dropping out. You need the data to tell you what kinds of kids are the ones that you should be concerned about, and then use research as a way to become more attuned to what has been shown to work for those kinds of kids.