DOINGWHATWORKS

Presentation

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Utilizing Data Systems for Dropout Prevention

April 2009

Topic: Dropout Prevention

Practice: Data Systems

Highlights

- A data system can help identify which students are off-track for graduation.
- An effective data system should gather data on why students dropout.
- The data system should be able to automatically flag students with low grades, course failures, and frequent absences; all indicators a student is off-track.
- Data systems should be standardized so they can work with the systems of other schools—district and statewide.

Full Transcript

Slide 1

Welcome to the overview on utilizing data systems for dropout prevention.

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Washington High School has a significant dropout problem. Principal Alvarez looks at her list of incoming ninth-grade students and wonders how many will be on-track for graduation at the end of the school year. Too many freshmen do not make a successful transition to high school and end up failing classes, missing school, and not earning credits. Eventually they drop out.

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Student "dropout" is a serious problem for many schools and districts. Even schools that know they have a problem often have no way to understand its nature or scope, let alone form an effective strategy to deal with it. A longitudinal database can help staff plan dropout prevention and credit recovery programs that help keep students in school.

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A data system can help staff clearly determine how specific or widespread the problem is.

One challenge is getting accurate enrollment data, especially for transfer students. Oftentimes, schools will record a student as enrolled once they receive a transfer notice, but the student may never actually show up. A system that doesn't mark a student as "in school" until they actually attend at the new location can help a school or district determine how best to proceed.

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A student-level data system can help identify which students are off-track for graduation. By tracking factors known to contribute to dropout, an early warning system can automatically flag students who display at-risk indicators, such as frequent absences, grade retention, low academic achievement, and behavioral problems. A predictive and comprehensive system would have data on many different factors, both student- and school-centered, known to lead to dropout.

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An effective data system also needs to gather data on why students drop out. Simply marking a student as "withdrawn" is unhelpful, so fields need to be created to provide more information.

Knowing that a student isn't showing up to class is a good start, but understanding why is key to creating powerful dropout prevention and credit recovery strategies.

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Lastly, a data system can help identify when a student is likely to drop out. Transitions such as moving from middle to high school or transferring between schools are high-risk periods. By regularly reviewing student transcripts, test scores, and discipline referrals for sudden changes in academic work or in behavior, schools can identify students who may be experiencing stressful life events that often lead to dropout.

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Once detailed data have been gathered, they can be used to develop appropriate schoolwide or student-level strategies to meet the specific needs of at-risk students. Data can guide resource allocation and reveal policies that are not serving students and need to be adjusted. Schools can determine the scope of the problem and design interventions accordingly.

A data-driven, specifically targeted dropout prevention plan such as this can be much more effective than a generalized program.

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For a data system to achieve all this, what features should it have?

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A data system needs to be standardized so that it can work with the systems of other schools, both district and statewide.

A uniform data structure allows schools to share accurate information and quickly identify students who fall off-track and need interventions.

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This level of standardization is not without challenges. It requires statewide coordination and adequate infrastructures in place for all schools to gather and transmit data.

Some "off the shelf" data systems can be used to get started and can help in ensuring cross-compatibility between districts.

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In order for data to be useful, it must be "longitudinal" In other words, it needs to be data gathered over a student's school career—at the very least, during middle and high school years. Students will need to be assigned IDs that are unique to them across the entire state, so that their data are easily transferred as they move from school to school.

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It goes without saying that data must be accurate, but even the most elegantly designed data system can fail at the point of data entry. Standards and checks for accuracy are essential and should not be taken for granted.

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In order to ensure accurate data is received, especially data that answers the "why" questions, the reasons for and methods of data collection need to be transparent to students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Aggregate results, trends, and findings need to be publicly available, although individual student data must be kept strictly confidential.

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These are the types of data systems that we all need to work towards, but in the meantime, it's important to remember that the key data that these systems will use—grades, attendance, test scores, course failures, etc.—are already routinely collected by schools. Using these data, it is possible to begin identifying both the scope of the problem and which individual students are off-track even before comprehensive longitudinal data systems are up and running.

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A year has passed since Washington High School implemented a districtwide data system. As fall approaches, Principal Alvarez reviews data on the incoming ninth graders and sees that several students have a history of academic failure in math. She plans to provide extra-support classes for these students to keep them on-track during their first year in high school.

The district has noticed some trends across all its high schools and is working to implement a "multiple pathways" approach in order to better meet the needs of the district's diverse student population.

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To learn more about data systems and dropout prevention, please explore the additional resources on the Doing What Works website.