

All Aboard

Students on Track for Graduation

By Liza Herzog, Johann Liljengren, Allie Mulvihill, and Robert Balfanz

During the past decade, Johns Hopkins University's Center for Social Organization of Schools and the Philadelphia Education Fund have focused a good bit of their work on middle level students in Philadelphia and around the country.

Through that work, we became more informed — and more alarmed — about the national dropout crisis. We decided to seek answers to two key questions that we believed to be at the core of the issue:

1. How early in the middle grades can we identify students who are most likely to drop out?
2. What student characteristics are most predictive of middle grades students' dropping out?

To uncover answers, we followed 13,000 students from 1996–97 through 2004–05. Our research revealed that dropouts can be identified as early as the sixth grade. Four variables rose to the top as best-bet predictors: low attendance (in Philadelphia, less than 80%), poor behavior marks, and a failing grade in math or literacy.

Every year, thousands of middle level students exhibit one or more of these "ABCs" (attendance, behavior, course failure). Those who have any one of these four risk factors have only a 10% to 20% chance of graduating within five years of entering high school.

Our research was a wake-up call! It demanded that we create a middle level school-based model designed to keep students on track and prepare them for high school. Supported by the William Penn Foundation for the past three years, we have been developing, implementing, and refining the model in two Philadelphia schools: a large middle school (grades 6–8) of more than 750 students and a K–8 school with an upper school of 190 students.

Through the process, we have learned that it is possible to create a multitiered school improvement and intervention model in middle grades schools in high-poverty neighborhoods where large numbers of students need a range of supports to stay on track. The following are key components of the model.

A Common Vision

Success is not possible without school-based ownership. Central to that sense of ownership is a shared vision that all students will graduate ready for college and career success. Fundamental to this vision are middle grades educators who see themselves as vital links on a relay team, moving alongside their students to transition them to high school colleagues who will guide them to the finish line.

Providing school-based staff — especially teachers — with multiple opportunities to explore and own this vision and to determine exactly what it takes to make it real, is essential.

Whole-School/Classroom Practices

The work must be anchored in research-based whole-school/classroom attendance and behavior practices, standards-based instruction that makes real-world connections and engages students in rigorous projects and product-based learning, developmentally appropriate pedagogy, professional development for staff aligned with these whole-school/classroom anchors, professional learning communities for staff and students, effective extra help strategies for students, and effective family involvement strategies.

Teacher-Friendly Data

School-based staff need tools to support their work. The first tool the Philadelphia Education Fund and Johns Hopkins University's Center for Social Organization of Schools created to put in teachers' hands was a user-friendly Early Indicator Data Tool.

In the first year of the project, data entry happened in-house at the

Philadelphia Education Fund, where we entered data on Excel spreadsheets, which we then used with site-based staff to identify students who were not on track. We added data regarding instructional reading levels because we believe that literacy competence is the main portal to academic success. We also added scores that determine schools' Adequate Yearly Progress in Pennsylvania.

We worked simultaneously with our partner, the School District of Philadelphia, to build an online data tool. This tool, which provides indicator data for each student, is now housed in the district's student information system, SchoolNet, and is available to teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

School Planning and Implementation Tool

Using the public health model of a three-tiered, comprehensive, aligned intervention plan as the basis for school improvement planning and implementation, we created a complementary tool for school-based staff.

The School Planning and Implementation Tool lays out three support tiers: whole-school/classroom, targeted, and intensive. During school improvement planning, including budget and staffing decision making, this tool encourages schools to move beyond a traditional concentration of resources at the whole-school/classroom level to intentionally provide support for students who need additional focused and intensive intervention to stay on track.

School-based staff members use the tool to map out how they are spreading their resources to address each indicator at each tier. Then, during grade group meetings held throughout the school year, educators use the tool to determine what support is available to students, what support is needed, and how they can be threaded together to create a weave of supports for students.

Unless schools are organized to provide this weave of aligned comprehensive interventions for students, approximately one-third of middle level students in Philadelphia who carry one or more early indicators remain prime dropout candidates.

A Student-Centered Organization

This model is about more than data and tools. It's about people. The model includes several relationship-centered components.

The Roster

The roster sets up teacher dyads, triads, and quads for staff-led, on-track grade group meetings throughout the year. These groups of adults, who teach a relatively small number of students in common, meet twice a month for a minimum of 45 minutes.

On-Track Grade Group Meetings

On-track grade group meetings are the linchpin of the teachers' work. Because time is a precious commodity in schools, our model calls for an explicit norm: on-track grade group meetings cannot be hijacked for other reasons. The recursive process of focusing on students to identify, align, implement, assess, and adjust supports from one or more intervention tiers, and to move students to be served on and off the grade group meeting "table," requires that this meeting time be sacred.

Here are some composites of on-track grade group meetings.

At a sixth grade on-track grade group meeting, a student previously flagged as having very poor attendance in fifth grade early in the school year, "came back to the table." Through a structured conversation, the teacher team recognized that she continued to miss a day or more of school every week, despite a series of interventions already in place.

The sixth grade team concurred that she was increasingly disengaged — not

just in some classes, but across the board! While agreeing to step-up current interventions, the team decided that they needed more information. Team members committed to pay focused attention to this student in class, in an effort to determine reasons for the disengagement. Was it an inability to concentrate? Was it an inability to comprehend certain concepts?

The school's Communities in Schools social services coordinator agreed to meet with the student to determine if she needed intensive case management services. If yes, the coordinator committed to do what was necessary to return to the next meeting with a draft intervention plan that the team would consider and then implement along with accompanying social services.

At a seventh grade on-track grade group meeting, there was concern about the mild but persistent misbehavior of a large number of students who wasted valuable class time. Sure enough, several of the students involved showed up on the Early Indicator Data Tool for behavioral reasons.

The team decided that, in addition to focused attention on those particular students, a whole-class intervention was necessary to re-establish uniform behavior expectations, consequences, and rewards across this group of seventh grade classrooms.

During an eighth grade on-track grade group meeting, the team discussed a well-behaved student who came to school every day, but persistently failed reading benchmark tests and was not completing assignments. The group decided this student needed additional differentiated instruction during the daily reading block, but agreed that this would not be enough. The student needed one-on-one tutoring. A City Year corps member who already had this student on her focus list stepped forward to say that she would tutor this student after school.

Team members keep records for each student, so as not to lose any of the threads that represent the comprehensive, aligned weave of supports and their impact on student achievement.

The On-Site Program Manager

In this model, schools have an on-site program manager whose sole responsibility is to integrate the project into the daily life of the school. This individual becomes the "grease and the glue," interfacing formally and informally with every adult in the school.

Formally, the program manager meets weekly with the school principal and leadership team, prepares and facilitates the on-track grade group meetings, takes the lead in weekly meetings of all service providers to ensure coordination of efforts, provides professional development about grade group meeting protocols and record keeping, and constantly integrates goals that are high on the school's "To Do" list.

The program manager scans the school environment regularly to identify what is and is not in place for students. At our middle school last year, the program manager observed that a genuine guidance program was missing and quickly formed an ad hoc school committee to rectify this situation. At our K-8 upper school, the program manager noted that students didn't have access to high-interest texts at the appropriate levels. Consequently, the school purchased the nationally recognized 100 Book Challenge.

Without an on-site program manager to center the work for at least the first three years, we run the risk of even the most committed staff becoming sidetracked by the "crisis of the moment."

Weaving Support

We began the work assuming that we could make the model successful by reorganizing and aligning school-based resources to stretch as far as possible to provide supports at the whole-school/classroom, targeted, and intensive tiers. At the end of our first year, however, we realized that there were not sufficient human resources on site to provide supports with the intensity, consistency, and scale required.

During the next year, we strategized to bring more "troops on the ground" to our partnership. In 2008-09, the Education Fund and Johns Hopkins University partnered with two additional organizations: City Year of Greater Philadelphia, a member of the City Year national service organization that recruits thousands of young men and woman to commit to a year of full-time service; and Communities in Schools Philadelphia, an affiliate of national Communities in School, Inc., which offers quality programs in schools to help young people learn, stay in school, and prepare for life.

City Year of Greater Philadelphia sent 14 well-prepared corps members to our large middle school to provide service at the targeted tier (tutoring, mentoring, and after school). The largest number of corps members worked with students in their sixth grade homerooms. Communities in Schools provided a social service site coordinator and a social worker. The social worker offered case management services exclusively to sixth graders; the site

coordinator, a master's-level social worker, focused on the seventh and eighth graders while leveraging external services across the grades for students and their families.

Diplomas Now

With the generous support of the PepsiCo Foundation, City Year and Communities in Schools, along with Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development, are working to expand this model across the country as the Diplomas Now program. The Ed Fund will serve as a national technical assistance partner for this initiative.

Diplomas Now is an ambitious program that requires a substantial investment in time and money. What makes the model affordable is the ability to focus on a relatively small subset of high schools (2,000) and their feeder middle schools that Johns Hopkins University research tells us produce 50% of our high school dropouts annually. Being able to target these schools with a powerful weave of interventions aimed directly at the students most likely to drop out produces a high rate of return on investment.

We close with the story of David, an eighth grade student at our large middle school.

David was what some teachers might call shy. He sat in the back, participated little, and avoided situations in which he'd be in the spotlight. In December, at the end of the first marking period, he was failing math and reading. David came to the attention of his teachers and other staff at an eighth grade team meeting shortly after winter break.

As a result of the team meeting, his teacher team placed him firmly on its radar. In addition, he began meeting with a City Year "near-peer" mentor. David was already receiving full case management services from an experienced Communities in Schools social services coordinator. His relationship with this committed professional provided a strong foundation for David that helped him accept help from others, such as his City Year mentor.

David's mentor came to know that David faced many hurdles at home, in his neighborhood, and with his own emotional health. Every day, David's mentor reached out to him before school, during school, and in an after-school program. Slowly, David came to trust his mentor implicitly. He shared a poem he had written. On the page, expressed beautifully, were his frustrations laid bare. Encouraged by his mentor to continue to "share his words with the world," David began to be a more confident young man.

In the spring, David presented his work at school-wide poetry slams and helped lead an after-school art program. Equipped with newfound public speaking and writing skills and a much more positive outlook toward school, David began to attend school regularly and put more effort into his coursework. His teachers and Communities in Schools social service coordinator continued their support.

In March, David earned Cs in math and reading, up from Fs the previous marking period. His attendance improved significantly. In late spring, David's City Year mentor asked David if he would be the designated student speaker at a presentation to the city and school district about Diplomas Now. Together, they wrote and rehearsed the speech. David told his transformative story to the guests. He was clearly moving back on track to high school graduation.

While all of us thrive on stories like David's, the hard truth is that there are literally thousands of middle grades (and high school) youth, mostly in large urban areas, who, without extra supports, will drop out. We look forward to continuing with Diplomas Now, positioned to be a powerful demonstration model that will produce thousands of stories like David's in Philadelphia and across the nation.