

Re-engagement Strategies

National High School Center

Re-engagement of high school dropouts (also known as school re-entry or dropout recovery) aims to give dropouts who want to return to school the help they need to graduate. More specifically, re-engagement programs aim to help dropouts remain healthy and safe; ready for work, college, and military service; ready for marriage, family, and parenting; and ready for civic engagement and service. Re-engagement programs may be housed in a wide range of offices and departments—most commonly a high school or an alternative education center. In some cases, re-engagement programs are overseen by a district central office or by specific district departments.

Some of the re-engagement programs are tailored to meet the unique needs of high school dropouts including young adults below the poverty line, pregnant youth and young parents, incarcerated youth and youth offenders, special education students, English language learners, homeless youth, and migrant youth. A number of research studies have demonstrated the positive impact of re-engagement programs on academic outcomes, employment outcomes, and health and social-emotional outcomes of these diverse populations including economically disadvantaged youth (Bloom, Gardenhire-Crooks, & Mandsager, 2009; Schochet, Burghardt, & Glazerman, 2001), migrant youth (e.g., Cranston-Gingras, 2003), youth offenders (e.g., Abrazaldo et al., 2009), and young parents (e.g., Bos & Fellerath, 1997; Quint, Bos, & Polit, 1997; Weinman, Buzi, Smith, & Nevarez, 2007).

In order to best serve the needs of these students, re-engagement programs offer a multi-dimensional approach that may include, in addition to intensive academic interventions, targeted interventions to promote responsible citizenship, life-coping skills, physical fitness, health and hygiene, job skills, parenting skills, and college preparation. The nature of the additional program components varies by model and population served. For example, in a model for youth offenders, grantees provide services in partnership with juvenile justice, education, construction, and workforce development agencies (Abrazaldo et al., 2009). A program that provides long-distance learning for children of migratory and seasonal farmworkers (Cranston-Gingras, 2003) and a model for at-risk youth (Bloom, Gardenhire-Crooks, & Mandsager, 2009) help youth transition from the program by providing vocational evaluation and counseling, career exploration, job skill development, and assistance in postsecondary placement. Instruction is often individualized to students' needs through small class sizes and tutoring services. In addition, students may receive mentoring, counseling, referral to external support systems, and incentive payments tied to length of stay, program attendance, or performance. To overcome factors that may prevent students from maintaining regular attendance, some programs also provide housing, child care, and transportation. While some re-engagement programs are non-selective, others specify eligibility criteria such as minimal scores on basic tests of mathematics and reading, no current drug use, demonstration of motivation and personal responsibility, no current gang affiliation, no records of criminal behavior, and no current psychological problems.

To recruit participants, re-engagement programs may host a hotline for dropouts who would like to learn more about the options available to them, run ads in the local media, distribute flyers, or hold fairs at local schools where students can re-enroll. Some districts or organizations may hire a specialist who works with community non-profit organizations and faith-based groups to identify dropouts, contact them, and provide information about re-engagement opportunities. In some cases, programs may recruit and train teachers, counselors, administrators, business people, parents, and other volunteers to visit students at home to encourage them to re-enroll.

Action Principles

For State

1. Identify and profile districts and schools within the state that have successfully re-engaged dropouts.
2. Communicate targets for dropout recovery and graduation rates to districts.
3. Require districts to provide administrators with professional development on practices for preventing or recovering dropouts.
4. Make available external or in-house experts on dropout recovery to districts as part of providing technical assistance and other resources.

5. Identify or provide funding sources to support dropout recovery efforts.
6. Provide guidance in how federal and state funds can be used to support dropout recovery efforts.

For District

1. Consider creating a dropout recovery office that has responsibility district-wide for identifying, tracking, and recovering students who dropped out.
2. Develop a district-wide dropout recovery database to identify and track students for dropout recovery. The database will include academic and support services provided to students, high school graduation or GED, and other student outcomes (e.g., college enrollment, job attainment).
3. Determine the ongoing staff development activities that will most directly impact the effectiveness of the re-engagement staff and provide professional development on a regular basis.
4. Collaborate with other state and municipal agencies (e.g., local law-enforcement agencies) and specific departments and offices in the district (e.g., the migrant education office) to coordinate delivery of services to recovered dropouts.

For School

1. Build awareness and obtain staff buy-in of the re-engagement program.
2. Prepare a school-specific dropout recovery plan and incorporate in the school improvement plan.
3. Assign appropriate staff to the re-engagement program, including an administrator, and define their responsibilities in the identification, tracking, recovery, and monitoring of recovered students. Identify the key qualities of staff for re-engagement programs and hire experienced teachers that have the desired qualities.
4. Establish a warm and welcoming atmosphere on the part of administrators, teachers, and staff from the time a student comes to enroll and throughout the student's stay in the program.
5. Maintain close communication and collaboration with parents/guardians of re-entry students.

Resources and References

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