15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention

Since 1986, the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) has conducted and analyzed research; sponsored workshops and national conferences; and collaborated with researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to further the mission of reducing America's dropout rate by meeting the needs of youth in at-risk situations, including students with disabilities.

Students report a variety of reasons for dropping out of school; therefore, the solutions are multi-dimensional. The NDPC has identified 15 Effective Strategies that have the most positive impact on reducing school dropout. These strategies appear to be independent, but actually work well together and frequently overlap. Although they can be implemented as stand-alone strategies, positive outcomes will result when school districts or other agencies develop program improvement plans that encompass most or all of these strategies. These strategies have been successful at all school levels from PK-12 and in rural, suburban, and urban settings. The strategies are grouped into four general categories: Foundational strategies (school-community perspective), early interventions, basic core strategies, and managing and improving instruction.

Foundational Strategies

- ★ Systemic Approach
- ★ School-Community Collaboration
- ★ Safe Learning Environments

Early Interventions

- ★ Family Engagement
- ★ Early Childhood Education
- ★ Early Literacy Development

Basic Core Strategies

- ★ Mentoring/Tutoring
- ★ Service-Learning
- ★ Alternative Schooling
- ★ After-School/Out-of-School Opportunities

Managing and Improving Instruction

- ★ Professional Development
- ★ Active Learning
- ★ Educational Technology
- ★ Individualized Instruction
- ★ Career and Technical Education (CTE)



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Effective Strategies Defined

★ **Systemic Approach**—This strategy calls for a systemic approach and process for ongoing and continuous improvement across all grade levels and among all stakeholders, through a shared and widely communicated vision and focus, tightly focused goals and objectives, selection of targeted research-based strategies and interventions, ongoing monitoring and feedback, and data-based decision making. It also requires the alignment of school policies, procedures, practices, and organizational structures and continuous monitoring of effectiveness.

★ **School-Community Collaboration**—This strategy focuses on the power of an engaged and responsive community where everyone in the community is accountable for the quality of education, resulting in a caring and collaborative environment where youth can thrive and achieve. Critical elements of this type of collaboration rely on effective, ongoing, and multi-dimensional communication so that dropout prevention is a communitywide and ongoing effort.

★ **Safe Learning Environments**—Safe, orderly, nurturing, inclusive, and inviting learning environments help students realize potential as individuals and as engaged members of society. All students need to be safe, physically and emotionally; to be expected to achieve; to be recognized and celebrated equitably for accomplishments; and to feel genuinely welcomed and supported. A safe and orderly learning environment provides both physical and emotional security as well as daily experiences, at all grade levels, that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills. A comprehensive discipline plan and violence prevention plan should include conflict resolution strategies and should deal with potential violence as well as crisis management. A safe, nurturing, and responsive learning environment supports all students, teachers, cultures, and subgroups; honors and supports diversity and social justice; treats students equitably; and recognizes the need for feedback, innovation, and second chances.

★ **Family Engagement**—Research consistently finds that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on youth's achievement and is one of the most accurate predictors of a student's success in school. Critical elements of this type of collaboration rely on effective, ongoing, and multi-dimensional, two-way communication as well as ongoing needs assessments and responsive family supports and interventions.

★ **Early Childhood Education**—Birth-to-five interventions demonstrate that providing a child additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who will ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of school through the primary grades.

★ **Early Literacy Development**—Early literacy interventions to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all subjects. Literacy development focus should continue P-12.

★ **Mentoring/Tutoring**—Mentoring is typically a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Mentoring offers a significant support structure for high-risk students. Tutoring, also typically a one-to-one activity, focuses on academic support and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs in collaboration with the student's base teacher.

★ **Service-Learning—**Service-learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching/learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels.

★ **Alternative Schooling**—Alternative or non-traditional schooling and delivery model options (e.g., alternative times and environments, blended learning, virtual learning, competency-based credit opportunities) provide alternative avenues to credit earning and graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student's individual and social needs, career goals, and academic requirements for obtaining a high school diploma and transitioning successfully to life beyond graduation.

★ **After-School/Out-of-School Opportunities**—Many schools provide after-school, before-school, and/or summer academic/enhancement/enrichment opportunities (e.g., tutoring, credit recovery, acceleration, homework support, etc.) that provide students with opportunities for assistance and recovery as well as high-interest options for discovery and learning. These opportunities often decrease information loss and can inspire interest in arenas otherwise inaccessible. Such experiences are especially important for at-risk students because out-of-school "gap time" is filled with constructive and engaging activities and/or needed academic support.

★ **Professional Development**—Adults who work with youth at risk of dropping out need to be provided ongoing professional learning opportunities, support, and feedback. The professional learning should align with the agreed upon vision and focus for the school/agency, the agreed upon instructional framework of high leverage research-based practices and strategies, and the identified needs of the population served. The professional learning opportunities provided should be frequently monitored to determine the fidelity of implementation and need for additional support and feedback.

★ **Active Learning**—Active learning and student engagement strategies engage and involve students in meaningful ways as partners in their own learning. These strategies include student voice and choice; effective feedback, peer assessment, and goal setting; cooperative learning; thinking critically, creatively, and reflectively; and micro-teaching, discussion, and two-way communication. To be most effective, teachers must provide students with tools and strategies to organize themselves and any new material; techniques to use while reading, writing, and doing math; and systematic steps to follow when working through a task or reflecting upon their own learning.

★ **Educational Technology**—Instructional Technology can effectively support teaching and learning while engaging students in meaningful, current, and authentic efforts; addressing multiple intelligences; and adapting to students' learning styles. Educational technology can effectively be used in individualized instruction and can not only help prepare students for the workforce, but can empower students who struggle with self-esteem. Effective use of technologies depends upon the timely response to and application of the rapidly expanding choices and matches to identified student needs.

★ **Individualized Instruction**—Learning experiences can be individualized, differentiated, or personalized (combining paced and tailored learning with flexibility in content or theme to fit the interests, preferences, and prior experiences of each learner). In an environment that is fully personalized, the learning objectives and content as well as the method and pace may all vary (so personalization encompasses differentiation and individualization).

★ **Career and Technical Education (CTE)—**Quality CTE programs and related career pathways and guidance programs with P-20W orientation are essential for all students. Youth need workplace skills as well as awareness and focus to increase not only the likelihood that they will be prepared for their careers, but also that school will be relevant to what is next.