Promising Practices for Keeping Kids in School

we engage

Most schools are using strategies to address truancy and early school leaving. But most schools do not have clear evidence of how well their strategies are working and tend to rely on impressions, case studies and anecdotal reports. There are, however, well designed research studies that provide clear results. This issue focuses on strategies for keeping kids in school that are known to be effective.

Fifteen Proven Strategies for Keeping Kids in School

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) in the United States identifies fifteen general strategies that have the most positive impact on high school graduation rates. These strategies have been successfully used in all school levels and in both rural and urban areas. Most of the strategies are effective when used in combination.

Systemic Renewal is the continuing process of evaluating goals, policies, practices and organizational structures to determine whether these support desired outcomes. A student's attitude toward school is the single most important factor in attendance problems. In systemic renewal focused on school attendance, school staff would adjust rules, policies, and procedures to implement a culture that is supportive, provides engaging and challenging instruction, and ensures significant relationships. These characteristics make students *want* to attend school rather than *having* to attend.

School-Community Collaboration recognizes that non-attendance is more than a school problem. The cost to the community of early school leaving is high. Dropping out is associated with poverty, poor interpersonal relationships, unemployment and increased crime. Social services, police, health, and employers eventually all become involved with undereducated youth who are not in school. Successful efforts to improve attendance cannot be limited to the school building.

A Safe Learning Environment increases a student's attachment to school by providing daily experiences that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills, and make a good climate for learning. Both bullies and their victims are likely to be regularly absent from school or leave school early. Schools with violence prevention plans that include conflict resolution are more successful in keeping kids in school.

Family Engagement is one of the most accurate predictors of a student's success in school. Students have better attendance records when parents monitor homework, discuss school with their children, and participate at the school including parent councils. Schools need creative strategies to engage disaffected families in the school and in their children's learning.

Early Childhood Education can enhance brain development. Some researchers believe that the most effective way to reduce the number of children who will ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible instruction in preschool and the primary grades. There is evidence that absenteeism in these early years is an important predictor of not completing high school.

Early Literacy Development establishes the reading and writing skills that serve as the foundation for effective learning in all subjects. Early intervention to help low-achieving students improve their skills in literacy and numeracy are a cost-effective way of providing student success and empowerment and reducing the risk of early school leaving. Family literacy activities can be a major dropout prevention strategy.

Mentoring and Tutoring have proven to be effective in keeping kids in school. Students report that having a person in school that regularly checks up on them gives them the sense that someone cares and, when coupled with individualized, remedial tutoring, motivates them to come to school.

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Service-Learning helps students to see the value of education through direct experiences in the community. For students who have significant risk factors, studies have shown that this strategy results in both improved grades and attendance.

Alternative Schooling provides a variety of options that can lead to increased academic skills and school completion. Smaller, more responsive and flexible environments can reconnect at-risk students with learning and the community.

After-School Opportunities are of two general types: sports and other extra-curricular activities and educational enhancement programs. Extra-curricular activities at the school site can reduce the likelihood of students missing school by providing new friends, a positive atmosphere and a feeling of accomplishment, as well as filling in empty time at the end of the school day. Educational programs on a wide variety of topics occurring after school or in summer may hook the interest of students who find long-term academic courses of little appeal.

Professional Development provides teachers with support and an avenue through which they can learn about innovative strategies and develop new skills and techniques for encouraging students to stay in school. Highly effective teachers with a wide repertoire of strategies make a significant difference in the grades of low-achieving students.

Active Learning uses teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students more fully in the learning process. By actively engaging in the many different ways to learn, students at-risk can find new approaches to problem-solving and achieving success.

Educational Technology can accommodate differences in learning and reduce educational disparities created by income, region or ethnic origin. Technology can provide students with authentic learning opportunities and adapt to various learning styles. Technology also can provide instructional supports for students whose literacy level does not match the maturity of their ideas and understandings.

Individualized Instruction provides flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies that accommodate individual differences. Research strongly suggests that schools that have created smaller and personalized learning environments have higher attendance and lower dropout rates.

Career and Technical Education programs have been shown to give youth the skills that prepare them for the demands of the workplace. Students who do not attend school regularly are poorly prepared for work. Some studies have shown that high-risk students who are enrolled in career-oriented schools were absent less frequently that high risk students in other schools.

For Further Information
Smink, Jay and Reimer, Mary S. (2005)
Fifteen Effective Strategies for Improving Student Attendance and Truancy Prevention
National Dropout Prevention Center/Network
www.dropoutprevention.org

Hoyle, John R. and Collier, Virginia (2006)
Urban CEO Superintendents' Alternative Strategies in Reducing School Dropouts
Sage Publications
http://eus.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/39/1/69

Bost, Loujeania (2007)
Building Effective Dropout Prevention Programs – Some Practical Strategies from Research and Practice
National Dropout Prevention Center/Network
www.dropoutprevention.org

Celebrate your successes
We want to continue to celebrate Alberta's school success stories in future issues.

Please continue to send brief descriptions of your promising practices and how they have improved attendance. Please include your name, e-mail and phone number, so we can contact you for more information.

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