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The Answer Sheet

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How ‘early warning systems’ are keeping kids in school

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By Robert Balfanz

The recent news that only 58 percent of Washington D.C. high school students graduated on time last year is a call to action. The nation’s capital has one of the lowest graduation rates in the country. The new statistic, based on a new more rigorous way of counting dropouts, is 20 percent lower than the 2010 estimate. And equally troubling: Seven of the 10 high schools with the city’s lowest rates — 60 percent or less — are traditional, non-selective public schools.

This is disheartening but also predictable. These high schools educate the highest concentration of students who show up in ninth grade already significantly off track for high school graduation. They are kids who often have had little support at home or in their communities. All too often, their schools have not been able to provide both the level of instruction and support needed for these most challenged students to succeed.

It does not have to be this way. For the high school graduation rate in Washington D.C. to rise significantly, fewer students need to arrive in ninth grade already half way down the path to dropping out.

Lost in the political debate about new legislation recently passed by the D.C. City Council are some of the law’s effective strategies to keep kids from dropping out. The new law will create an “early-warning system” pilot project in four D.C. schools to track how students in grades 4 through 9 are progressing toward high school and college.

It will use proven predictors of dropping out of school, such as attendance, behavior and course performance in English and math, to identify early which students are disengaging from school and most likely to drop out of school. The program then will offer enhanced support to those struggling students, enabling schools to get the right help to students at the right time.

Equally important, these students will be supported through the tricky transitions to both middle and high school, treacherous times when the path to dropping out often begins. The hope is that eventually this approach would be expanded to all District schools.

Such early warning systems are cropping up all over the country because they work. They grew out of a simple premise that kids disengage from school gradually and send clear signals that they are on the way to dropping out. The fact is that kids don't wake up one day in ninth grade and just quit school. Instead, that process starts long before – and research shows it's possible to stop it with the right support.

A successful example of such an effort can be found at Browne Education Campus in Northeast Washington, which has partnered with Diplomas Now, a model based on research showing that a sixth-grader with just one of these early warning signs has a 75 percent chance of dropping out of school: poor attendance, poor behavior and failure in English or math. Diplomas Now identifies these students early and creates an individualized plan to help each student succeed. After the 2010-2011 school year, Browne saw a 38 percent reduction in students flagged at the beginning of the school year for suspensions, an 18 percent reduction in kids who had failed math and a 9 percent reduction in those who had failed English.

Perhaps most impressive is Browne's 83 percent reduction in students who were identified at the start of that school year as chronically absent – missing 20 or more days. This is critical because if students are not in school, they cannot learn. Browne's secret weapon is combining whole-school improvements, with more caring adults who are guided by data to reach out to students before they disengage and to bring back those who already have.

Browne is one of about two dozen schools nationwide partnering with Diplomas Now, and these schools receive extra staff and support from three national nonprofits: Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development Secondary, a school reform model that improves curriculum and instruction; City Year's young adult "near peers" who welcome students to school, call them if they don't show up, and offer tutoring and service opportunities; and Communities In Schools' case managers who help the neediest students and their families access community resources and visit the homes of students who miss five days or more of school.

Several weeks ago, we reported the encouraging news that the nation's number of "dropout factories" — high schools graduating 60 percent or less of their students — has declined by about 23 percent since 2002. In addition, more than half of the states have increased their graduation rates. It has been states and districts that have combined school reform with increased community involvement that have moved ahead. Early warning systems, such as the one included in the new D.C. law, will keep young people on the path to graduation.

I hope that the next time we report the data on "dropout factories," Washington D.C.'s traditional public high schools are not among them.

This isn't just about data or numbers. But these are real kids who, frankly, are pretty much consigned to dead-end jobs, public assistance or prison after dropping out of high school. If nothing else, the recent recession has underscored the fact that a high school diploma simply is not enough to get a decent job in the 21st century.