

IMPROVING DROPOUT STATISTICS THROUGH THE 8 CONDITIONS FRAMEWORK

Research shows that high school graduation is a strong predictor of economic and social mobility. Yet, according to *Diploma Count 2008*, a report sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, three out of ten students were predicted to not graduate in 2008, which equates to roughly 1.23 million non-graduates. As schools struggle to keep students from dropping out, many educational leaders and researchers have shown that the first step in reducing dropout rates is fostering aspirations.

As the superintendent in Selma, Alabama from 1990 to 2007, Dr. James Carter led his district in reducing the dropout rate from 35% to 4.47%. Dr. Carter attributes this dramatic reduction to the district's concentrated effort to get to know and understand students in the fifth and sixth grades. He states, "For many of our students, the 8 Conditions were not in place. The Conditions of Belonging, Heroes, and Sense of Accomplishment fit right in with how to prevent these students from dropping out. Our students had given up on themselves and felt that no one cared about them. Many were waiting to turn sixteen so they could drop out." Discussing the approach his district took, Dr. Carter relates, "Our intervention consisted of getting these students into an alternative program where we let them know we cared about them and wanted them to achieve. We focused on building relationships with students, individualizing learning, making learning interesting, and spending time discovering students' concerns." While the State of Alabama reported a graduation rate of 61% in 2008 (www.all4ed.org), Selma continues to have graduation percentages well above the state average. Dr. Carter believes Selma's success is a direct result of focusing on student aspirations and helping students believe in their own potential.

Dr. Carter's experience is consistent with research related to dropout and graduation rates:

- In a comprehensive study of schools with high and low dropout rates, the authors concluded that "students who feel a sense of belonging and are connected to school are less likely to drop out of school" (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007, p. 333).
- In a study funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation titled *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, it was determined that the primary reason students left school was because they were bored (www.gatesfoundation.org).
- A longitudinal study of youth in Chicago revealed that a student's attendance and expectation of his or her own educational attainment were strong predictors of high school completion (Ou & Reynolds, 2008).

When students have a sense of belonging and purpose at school, they become engaged in the learning process and recognize the relevance of school to their own aspirations. The My Voice™ Survey provides educators with the students' perspectives on how effectively the school is fostering the Conditions that affect student aspirations. Equipped with this knowledge, educators can take steps to ensure that students want to attend school and set high academic goals for themselves. Addressing these two predictors of educational attainment will result in lower dropout rates.

In another area of the country, Mike Cutler, superintendent in Philipsburg, MT, also touts the impact of the 8 Conditions on dropout and attendance rates. According to Mr. Cutler, "The My Voice Survey opened our eyes. As a result of understanding students' perspectives and how students felt about their sense of belonging, we made many changes. Before undertaking the Aspirations work, a significant number of students would lose a semester grade due to the number of classes they missed. So far this school year [2008-09], no student has lost a grade due to missing classes. I attribute this improvement to the changes we made in response to the My Voice Survey results."

From 2005 through 2008, as part of a statewide initiative called *Follow the Child*, New Hampshire made the My Voice Survey available to all schools. Schools implemented numerous changes in response to their survey results. According to Mary Heath, Deputy Commissioner of Education, "The actions that followed from the My Voice Survey spurred cultural changes in schools." New Hampshire's Department of Education reports that the high school dropout rate is decreasing. In 2001-2002, the four year cumulative dropout rate was 15.1 percent. For 2007-2008, the rate was 11.3 percent. These percentages translate into 600 more students who stayed in school and graduated.

Educational leaders around the country have witnessed first hand the impact the My Voice Survey and Aspirations work has on improving school attendance. Research supports the need for students to be engaged and genuinely invested in school in order to reduce dropout rates. Fostering the 8 Conditions builds a school culture where students are engaged and invested in their learning, which ultimately leads to a greater number of students graduating from school and remaining motivated to achieve their aspirations.

References

Christle, C. A., Jolivet, K., & Nelson, C. M. (2007). School Characteristics Related to High School Dropout Rates. *Remedial and Special Education*, 28, 325-339.

Ou, S.-R., & Reynolds, A. J. (2008). Predictors of Educational Attainment in the Chicago Longitudinal Study. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 23(2), 199-229.