

Strategies for Improving Graduation Outcomes: Policy Considerations for Illinois

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Contents

	Page
Introduction.....	1
Defining the Issue in Illinois.....	1
The Illinois Dropout Prevention Summit.....	3
Nationwide Efforts to Improve Graduation Outcomes.....	4
Preliminary Questions for Policymakers	9
Research-Based Recommendations	10
Prevention	10
Prevention in Illinois.....	11
Prevention in Other States	12
Intervention and Early Identification	13
Intervention and Early Identification in Illinois.....	14
Intervention and Early Identification in Other States	14
Reengagement.....	15
Reengagement in Illinois	16
Reengagement in Other States	17
National Foundation and Organization Websites	18
Illinois Foundation and Organization Websites and Contact Information	18
Selected Resources.....	20
Appendix. Geographic Data Displays of Illinois High School Dropout Data	

Introduction

Approximately 1.2 million U.S. students fail to graduate from high school with their class each school year (America's Promise Alliance, 2009). Illinois State Board of Education (2008) statistics reveal that nearly 30,000 Illinois students dropped out of high school during the 2007–08 school year.

An established body of research links graduation failure to increases in crime and poverty and decreases in quality of life, physical and mental health, and earning potential. Using the difference in the average earning potential of a high school dropout and a high school graduate, a recent report by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009b) estimates a loss of nearly \$12 billion in total lifetime additional income for the Illinois students who failed to graduate with their class in 2009 alone. In addition to the impact of these losses on the individuals who drop out, there are larger societal costs resulting from losses in tax revenue and productivity and increases in the demand for public assistance. These costs expand even further when the expenses associated with crime and health care are taken into account.

States, districts, and communities are working to improve graduation rates by evaluating their own policies, coordinating existing resources, and investigating what is working in their own region and nationwide. Illinois is no exception either in the existence of a dropout problem or in the intent to address it effectively. Illinois education stakeholders are actively looking for ways to increase the graduation rate and to put more students on the path to high school completion, postsecondary education, and workforce competitiveness.

The purpose of this publication is to provide a summary of existing antidropout programs and initiatives as well as current research on best practices to inform better the education policymakers who are working to improve graduation outcomes in Illinois.

Defining the Issue in Illinois

Who Is a Dropout Under Illinois Law?

Under Illinois law, a “dropout” is “any child enrolled in grades 1 through 12 whose name has been removed from the district enrollment roster for any reason other than his death, extended illness, graduation or completion of a program of studies and who has not transferred to another public or private school” (105 ILCS 5/26–2a; Illinois General Assembly, n.d.-a). Illinois compulsory attendance law mandates that all students between the ages of 7 and 17 attend school with exceptions for students who are schooled privately, are unable to attend for medical reasons, or have been suspended or expelled (105 ILCS 5/26–1; Illinois General Assembly, n.d.-b). Parents or guardians are responsible for ensuring attendance of students (even those pupils who are outside of the compulsory age range but who are enrolled in the Grades K–12 system). The minimum age at which a student may drop out was raised from 16 to 17 effective in 2005.

How Does Illinois Calculate Dropout and Graduation Rates?

Illinois must report yearly *graduation rates* for purposes of determining adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Illinois calculates graduation rates by dividing the number of graduates in a given year by the number of students who began in ninth grade four year earlier, adjusted for student transfers and deaths. For purposes of determining who is a graduate, Illinois only counts students who received a regular or advanced diploma, not a general equivalency diploma (GED) or other equivalency certificate. Although students who leave school to attend a GED program are not counted as graduates, they also are removed from the cohort altogether (as if they transferred) and therefore do not factor in to the graduation rate calculation.

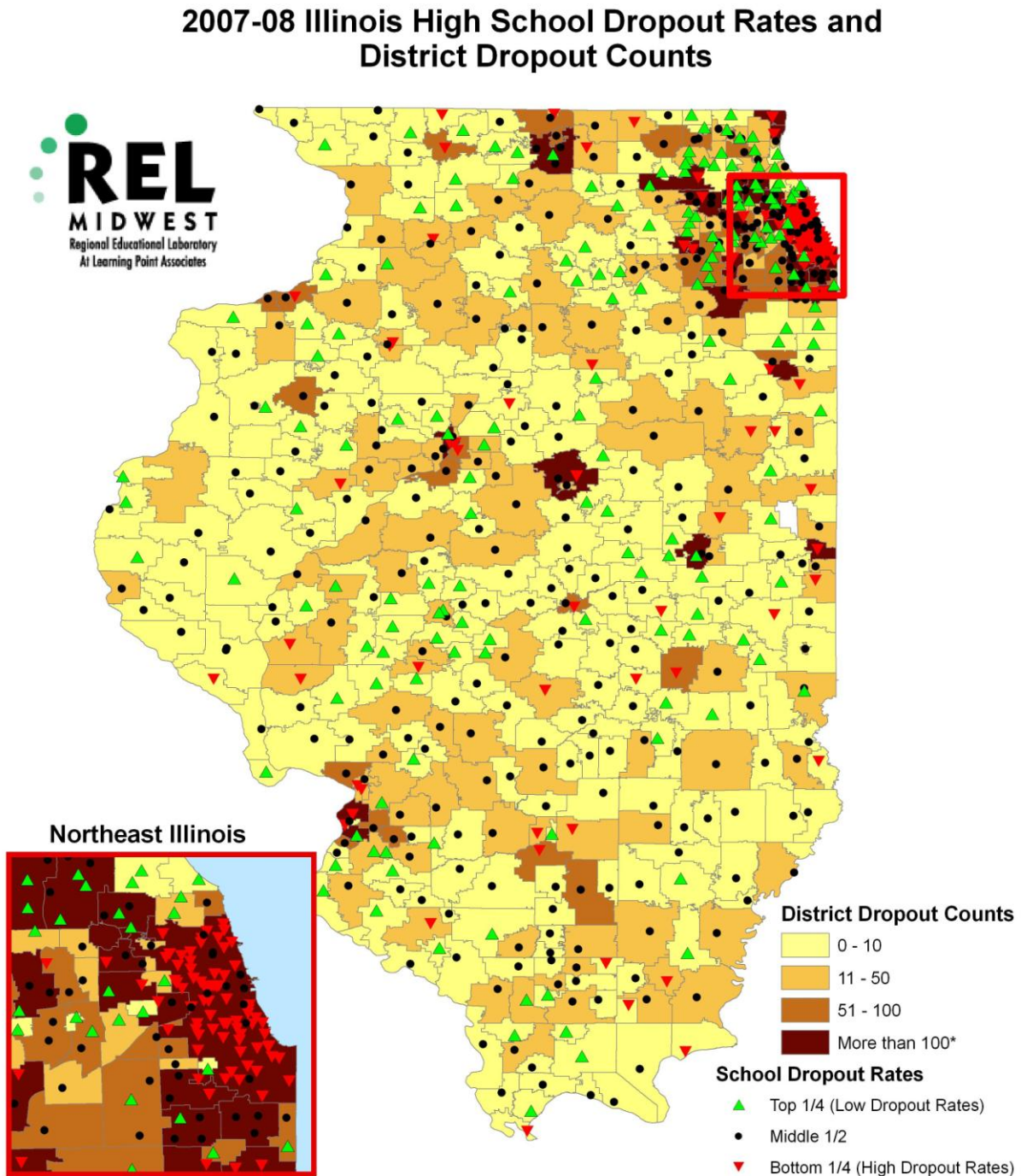
Illinois also calculates *dropout counts* and *dropout rates* on an annual basis. The dropout count is the number of students who drop out in a given year. Illinois calculates the dropout rate by dividing the number of dropouts in Grades 9–12 by the fall enrollment for those grades.

What Do the Data Show About the Dropout Issue in Illinois?

To fully understand the dropout picture in Illinois, policymakers might consider the graduation data within a larger context. In anticipation of the Illinois Dropout Summit, ISBE requested that REL Midwest create geographic data displays using ISBE, U.S. Census, and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data. The purpose of the analysis was to understand more about factors associated with high school dropout as well as to identify schools that stand apart from some of the typical patterns. With some exceptions, the incidence of dropping out appears to correlate with certain social and demographic factors. In Illinois, as in other states, dropping out is more prevalent in highly populated urban districts of larger metropolitan areas, though the REL Midwest analysis revealed that dropout problems do exist in rural and suburban communities as well. Also, as in national trends, the incidence of dropping out in Illinois seems to correlate with poverty levels, with the poorest districts having the lowest graduation rates. In addition, schools performing differently than expected given typical trends are distributed throughout the state.

The map shown in Figure 1 displays 2007–08 statewide school dropout rates and district dropout counts. Specifically, districts are colored based on the total number of dropouts. The darker colors indicate larger number of dropout students. High schools are coded according to their dropout rates. Dropout rates for the state were broken into quartiles. Schools that are in the top quartile are presented as upward-facing green triangles and have the lowest dropout rates. Schools that are in the bottom quartile are presented as downward-facing red triangles and have the highest dropout rates. Finally, schools in the middle two quartiles are presented as black dots. Additional geographic data displays prepared by REL Midwest along with detailed explanations for each map may be found in the Appendix.

Figure 1. 2007–08 Illinois High School Dropout Rates and District Dropout Counts



* Chicago Public Schools reported a dropout count of 14,273. The district with the next highest dropout count was School District 46, which reported a dropout count of 449.

Data: 2007-08 school-level dropout rates drawn from Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) report card data; 2007-08 district dropout numbers obtained from the ISBE report *2007-2008 Number of High School Dropouts, by Grade, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity* downloaded from the ISBE website.

Geography: School district boundary files obtained from the Census Bureau; school coordinates downloaded from the 2006-07 NCES Common Core of Data. **Map:** Map created by Yinmei Wan of the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest at Learning Point Associates.

The Illinois Dropout Prevention Summit

In November 2009, the Illinois Dropout Prevention Summit will be convened at Illinois State University. The summit attendees will be organized by region and will work to create plans leading to improved graduation outcomes. Supported primarily by a grant from the America's Promise Alliance, the summit will be the result of a collaborative planning effort by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the Illinois Principals Association, the Illinois Business Roundtable, Advance Illinois, Illinois State University, REL Midwest at Learning Point Associates, Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center at Learning Point Associates, the Boeing Company and State Farm Insurance Companies. A parallel summit for Illinois students was held in October 2009.

Generally, strategies that might be implemented to improve graduation outcomes fall into three key categories:

- *Prevention*: Strategies that support student success at all levels and address the root causes of dropping out of school
- *Intervention and early identification*: Policies for enabling teachers, school leaders, and community members to identify students at risk of dropping out and to intervene at critical points when students fall off the path to high school graduation
- *Reengagement*: Strategies to connect students who have dropped out or who are on the verge of dropping out, with programs leading to high school completion and readiness for postsecondary education and employment

A number of state-level policies and initiatives have been implemented for the purpose of helping Illinois students achieve high school completion. In addition, several local programs specifically aimed at addressing the dropout problem have been implemented in Illinois communities. Detailed discussions of state and local policies, initiatives, and programs for prevention, intervention and early identification, and reengagement appear in the sections that follow related to each of these three focus areas.

Nationwide Efforts to Improve Graduation Outcomes

Uniform Graduation Rates

Graduation data can be reported in numerous ways, and states currently do so, often reporting different rates to suit a particular purpose, audience, or compliance requirement. Following is a brief breakdown of some of the more common methods for calculating graduation rates.

- The *leaver rate* or *departure classification index* is calculated by dividing the number of students who received standard high school diplomas by the total number of students who have dropped out, graduated with a standard diploma, or graduated with other completion credentials.
- The *four-year adjusted cohort rate* calculates graduation rates by dividing the number of graduates with a regular high school diploma in an adjusted cohort by the number in the adjusted cohort. The adjusted cohort is the number of first-time ninth graders four years

ago, plus students who transfer into the cohort and minus students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or who are deceased. Illinois's current method of calculating the graduation rate is similar to this rate. Key differences in Illinois's method are as follows: (1) Illinois's practice of counting any student who graduates in a given school year as a graduate, regardless of how long it took that student to graduate (and adjusts the total cohort to include these students as well), and (2) Illinois's removal of GED students from the total cohort.

- The *cumulative promotion index* (CPI) is the calculation method used by Christopher Swanson in the Editorial Projects in Education *Cities in Crisis* reports (Swanson 2008, 2009). The CPI “captures the four key steps a student must take in order to graduate: three grade-to-grade promotions (9 to 10, 10 to 11, and 11 to 12) and ultimately earning a diploma (grade 12 to graduation)” (Swanson, 2009, p. 10). Each of these four steps is represented in the formula by a ratio. For example, the 9 to 10 promotion is calculated by dividing the number of 10th-grade students in the fall by the number of ninth-grade students the previous fall. The four ratios are then multiplied together to generate the CPI graduation rate.
- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) currently reports graduation rates for all states and districts using what they term the *averaged freshman graduation rate* (AFGR). The AFGR is calculated by dividing the number of regular diploma recipients in a given year by the average of the membership in Grades 8, 9, and 10 that had been reported five, four, and three years earlier. Because AFGR data are available for most states and districts, it is a useful means of comparing graduation rates across different locations. Variation still exists, however, in how states and localities define and approach the individual components that are used to determine the AFGR.

States and districts also may report dropout rates—estimates of the percentage of students who drop out of school. Dropout rates can be calculated in different ways as well.

- The *event dropout rate* is the percentage of students exiting high school without a diploma in a given year. Illinois's method of calculating dropout rates fits into this category.
- The *status dropout rate* measures the percentage of individuals 16–24 years old who are not in school and have no diploma.
- The *cohort dropout rate* or *longitudinal dropout rate* measures the percentage of students who drop out within a cohort of students that is followed over time (e.g., the percentage of students who started high school in a given year and, as of four years later, have dropped out of school).

NCLB requires that state accountability be measured in part by the “graduation rate,” defined as the percentage of students graduating in “the standard number of years” with a regular diploma (one aligned with state standards and not a GED). Absent detailed regulatory guidance, graduation rates have been calculated numerous ways, using a variety of methods and assumptions. In 2005, the National Governors Association (NGA) made a 50-state compact to adopt a common cohort formula for all states to use in calculating graduation rates by 2012. Federal regulations issued in late 2008 clarify what is meant by “graduation rate” under NCLB

and require states to begin calculating graduation rates using an adjusted cohort formula similar to the rate established by the NGA compact. States must begin reporting the adjusted cohort formula for the 2010–11 school year, and this formula will be used for purposes of determining AYP under NCLB for the 2011–12 school year. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has indicated that he supports these graduation rate regulations (see U.S. Department of Education, 2009b).

One issue related to the federal reporting requirements is how to account for students who take longer than four years to graduate from high school. The key indicators for graduation rates factor in students who graduate in the standard number of years; schools, districts, and states typically are not able to include students who drop out and later reenter and successfully graduate. Under the current regulations, however, states may report a separate “extended year” graduation rate in addition to the main indicator. This other rate can include students who take longer than four years to graduate. The extended rate may be considered as part of the calculations for determining AYP.

State Efforts to Improve Graduation Rates

Several states have passed laws or otherwise adopted policies for deterring students from dropping out. These efforts range from isolated policy changes to large-scale comprehensive efforts. Many of the programs and initiatives that were developed and supported as a result of these laws and policies connect to the focus areas of prevention, intervention and early identification, and reengagement. Examples may provide insight for Illinois policymakers interested in finding ways to address the dropout issue. Some recent examples are provided in Table 1. Although many of these state-level policies have yet to be fully tested, some states report that the graduation picture is changing as a result of their legislation and initiatives.

Table 1. Recent Policy Activity Related to Improving Graduation Rates¹

State	Recent Policy Activity
Alabama	SB 334 (2009) increases the compulsory age of attendance to 17, creates a Dropout Prevention and Recovery Fund, directs the Alabama Department of Education to establish intervention procedures for schools with lower graduation rates, and requires data collection on key measures related to high school completion.
Arkansas	HB 1956 (2009) establishes the Project Graduation Commission to research and recommend dropout prevention strategies and examine the economic impact of graduation rates. SB 918 (2009) establishes the Smart Core Incentive Funding Program to provide support to assist students in completing the state’s Smart Core curriculum.

¹ The information in Table 1 was obtained by cross-referencing the bill-tracking databases on several websites: the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Education Commission of the States, and state legislature databases. The information was accessed in August 2009.

State	Recent Policy Activity
Colorado	HB 1423 (2009) establishes the Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement and creates the Student Re-engagement Grant Program. HB 1280 (2009) establishes a National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Corps program in the state. SB 90 (2009) establishes a state advisory council for parent involvement in education in the Colorado Department of Education to focus on several issues, including dropout prevention. SB 123 (2009) establishes a student support and wellness program with several goals, including improving attendance and graduation rates. In addition, HB 08-1370 (2008) establishes the School Counselor Corps Grant Program for the purpose of reducing dropout rates by providing funding for school counselors in the secondary grades, and HB 1336 (2008) establishes truancy reporting and attendance monitoring procedures.
Illinois	SB 1796 (2009) forms the Illinois Hope and Opportunity Pathways through Education Program with the goal of reengaging dropouts in programs to help them complete high school. A 2007 bill (HJR 87) establishes the Task Force on Re-Enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School.
Indiana	HB 1343 (2009) creates a Dropout Prevention Fund to support programs that identify students at risk of dropping out. HB 1419 (2009) mandates that school corporations establish plans for improving discipline systems and behavior, which include alternatives to student suspension or expulsion and encourage parent involvement.
Louisiana	SB 316 (2009) establishes a state initiative aimed increasing graduation rates and preparing high school students for postsecondary education and work. HB 731 (2009) establishes legal responsibilities and consequences for students, parents, and legal custodians related to student truancy. In addition, HB 1091 (2008) mandates exit interviews and parental consent for students who drop out.
Maine	SB 528 (2009) establishes the Center of Excellence for At-Risk Students. This center will provide instruction and support to students at risk of dropping out.
Maryland	SB 264 (2008) requires local education agencies to provide information about alternative education and high school equivalency programs to individuals who have dropped out and have not yet earned a high school diploma or certificate. A 2006 bill (SB 59) mandates the use of a cohort formula for calculating graduation rates.
Massachusetts	SB 2766 (2008) creates a prevention and dropout recovery commission to identify best practices and evaluate existing programs and implements a system to collect longitudinal data.
Mississippi	Mississippi Board of Education Policy 3105 (2007) establishes a comprehensive Dropout Prevention Plan in connection with specific goals for increasing the graduation rate and decreasing the dropout and truancy rates.
Missouri	SB 291 (2009) establishes the Persistence to Graduation Fund, which funds districts in implementing dropout prevention programs.
Nevada	SB 77 (2009) permits school district boards to establish mentoring programs aimed at supporting student engagement, middle to high school transition, and school completion. AB 487 (2009) mandates district plans and supports for students transitioning from elementary school to middle school or junior high school.

State	Recent Policy Activity
North Carolina	HB 187 (2009) mandates that local school boards implement policies for supporting pregnant students and students who are parents and helping them to remain enrolled in and complete school. It also includes several recommendations for board policies related to the support of students in middle to high school transition, the reduction or the amounts of student suspensions and expulsions, and the support of suspended students.
Oklahoma	HB 1050 (2009) establishes a mentoring program designed to help at-risk students graduate.
Texas	HB 2237 (2007) requires a study of best practices to prevent dropping out, authorizes funding for student club activities for students at risk of dropping out and mandates that districts with high dropout rates develop detailed dropout prevention strategy plans.
Utah	R277-702 (2009) allows students who have not completed school or passed the General Educational Development exam to return to their school prior to their class's graduation in order to work to complete the requirements for a traditional high school diploma.
Vermont	HB 405 (2009) supports research on high school improvement and the implementation of a longitudinal data system.
Virginia	HB 259 (2009) establishes recordkeeping and follow-up procedures related to student transfers. HB 1794 (2009) requires that students cannot be suspended because of truancy alone.
Wyoming	SB 60 (2009) establishes a National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program in the state.

Federal Steps

The federal government supports state and local efforts to address the dropout issue, primarily through the funding of programs and research. In the past, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded grants to state and local education agencies for dropout prevention and reengagement programs, though funds have not been appropriated for this program since fiscal year 2006. The Department of Education also supports the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, both of which disseminate research and resources related to dropout prevention practices. The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) sponsors research on the dropout issue through a variety of programs and projects. The recent passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) will provide funding opportunities for a range of education programs, some of which will likely relate to the goal of improving graduation outcomes. In addition, Congress is considering a number of legislative proposals addressing the dropout issue, some of which are tied to the reauthorization of ESEA.

Preliminary Questions for Policymakers

The following questions address issues that Illinois policymakers might consider when working to improve graduation outcomes in their state.²

1. *Why are students in your school, district, community, or state dropping out of school?*

Surveys and interviews of students who have dropped out reveal a number of reasons for their decisions, ranging from boredom to course failure to social and economic pulls. The student reported reasons can differ from those reported by parents and educators. Conducting a similar inquiry with dropouts in your region could provide insight into how to keep students from leaving the system and reengage those students who already have left.

2. *What is the extent of the dropout crisis in your school, district, community, or state?*

Knowing the nature of the problem is a critical first step in addressing it. Policymakers seeking to understand their particular issues might consider not only the current graduation and dropout rates but also how those rates have changed over time.

3. *Why does lowering the dropout rate matter?*

What are the goals underlying antidropout policies? To increase the number of students earning a high school diploma? To help students become educated, productive citizens? Both?

4. *What is the basis for this concern?*

What parts of the dropout problem most concern you? Is it the size of the problem now or trends that point to more serious issues to come? Are you more concerned with disparities of race, ethnicity, or class than with the overall problem? What if you were able to decrease the dropout rate but disproportions remained?

5. *What types of programs could be supported?*

What if a program focused resources on students on the cusp of succeeding, diverting resources from those students who have the most severe problems? What about using financial incentives such as gift certificates or even cash to keep students in school? What might be the consequences of using rule-based, punitive measures to address the dropout issue?

6. *Do resources exist that can be incorporated into new prevention, intervention, or reengagement strategies?*

Does your community have resources that can be reorganized or repurposed to address the dropout issue? These resources could be individuals, funds, programs, technology, or

² Many of these questions were derived from questions posed in the briefing report titled *Dropout Prevention: Strategies for Improving High School Graduation Rates*, prepared by the Center for Child and Family Policy (2008) at Duke University. The report was published in connection with the North Carolina Family Impact Seminar on high school dropout.

even information. For example, what sorts of data do you already have that might support an early warning system to identify students at risk of dropping out?

Research-Based Recommendations

In 2008, IES published a report detailing research-based recommendations for addressing the dropout issue (Dynarski et al., 2008). The following are the key recommendations included in the report:

1. Utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out.
2. Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.
3. Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.
4. Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills.
5. Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.
6. Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school.

These recommendations are closely aligned with the focus areas of prevention (recommendations 3–6) and intervention and early identification (recommendations 1 and 2). The IES report elaborates further on each recommendation and includes a checklist of steps for carrying them out. Research reviewed by IES will be discussed in the sections on prevention, intervention and early identification, and reengagement that follow.

Prevention

Prevention strategies support student success at all levels and address the root causes of dropping out of school. Because prevention strategies are designed to keep students on track and address problems before they become serious obstacles, they are often considered the cornerstone of antidropout initiatives. The term “dropout prevention” is often a catchall for any strategy aimed at addressing the dropout issue, including targeted interventions and reengagement efforts. For the purposes of this policy brief, prevention encompasses programs and services delivered to the general population of students within an educational setting. It will cover schoolwide and systemwide initiatives for middle and high school students as well as prevention strategies that may be implemented in prekindergarten and the early grades. While early education strategies may seem removed from the issue of high school graduation, they are of particular concern to states because research has shown that an investment in quality early education can have dramatic positive long-term outcomes.

State and local education leaders, in Illinois and in other states, have initiated a number of programs aimed at setting more students on trajectories for future academic success, including high school graduation. Some such efforts include the following:

- Local, regional, and state councils or task forces that strive to streamline and integrate the delivery of education resources across schools and grade levels (e.g., K–12, P–16, or P–20 councils).
- Early childhood education programs that promote student success.
- Tiered intervention models that monitor student progress and provide increasingly intense interventions targeting students’ needs (e.g., response to intervention, or RTI).
- Schoolwide efforts to make instruction more personalized, relevant, and engaging, such as “schools within schools,” career-related education and advising, service learning programs, and dual-enrollment programs.
- Programs that provide special supports at critical, transitional grade levels such as ninth-grade academies.

Researchers have made strides in identifying and developing effective prevention strategies. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated the long-term benefits of quality early childhood education and care. Computer simulations based on this research have projected dramatic impacts on graduation rates when systematic and sustained interventions begin in early childhood and continue through adolescence. In addition, What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), an IES-funded research center, has rigorously evaluated the existing data and research on dropout prevention programs, identifying model programs with a proven positive impact. This growing body of research has been considered by policymakers and practitioners working to support students and effectively deliver resources from prekindergarten through graduation.

Prevention in Illinois

Because the prevention category includes services delivered to the general population of students that aim to keep all students on track from early childhood on, much of the work of the state education system therefore falls into this overarching set of strategies.

Illinois’s ongoing work around RTI provides an example of a state-level prevention strategy. Illinois has a comprehensive statewide RTI plan and requires that districts create and implement their own RTI plans. The RTI plans provide a framework for supporting students academically through frequent assessment and the use of interventions tailored to student needs. The state also encourages an RTI support system for student behavior. Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) is a nationally recognized approach to addressing behavior issues through tiered supports, and Illinois is a leader in promoting PBIS.

In addition, Illinois’s state funding programs for preschool connect to the prevention strategy of comprehensive early childhood education.

State and local agencies have implemented prevention programs and initiatives in a number of Illinois communities, funded by both public and private initiatives. The following are examples of prevention efforts taking place throughout Illinois.

- The Connections Project at Illinois State University works with ISBE to implement High Schools That Work (HSTW) pilot programs in the state. HSTW is a national school-improvement initiative of the Southern Regional Education Board. The model aims to help students graduate from high school with the skills required for postsecondary success. Key focus areas of the program are strengthening the middle and high school curriculum and improving the quality of career and technical education.
- Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) is a youth-led consortium of community organizations from several Chicago neighborhoods concerned with improving graduation rates and college access for Chicago Public Schools students. In 2008, VOYCE published a student-researched report on the dropout issue that included policy recommendations.
- Union Park Schools is working with the Talent Development High Schools Program to open a Talent Development High School in Chicago's West Garfield Park neighborhood in fall of 2009. The school-improvement model is designed to reform large high schools and incorporates prevention strategies related to both the school climate and the curriculum.

Prevention in Other States

Sample State and Local Programs. Dropout-prevention strategies have taken a variety of forms in various states. The following is a brief description of notable programs and initiatives.

- Career academies are schools within schools that offer a career-themed curriculum. The academies work to provide students with classroom coursework as well as work experiences in the community that connect to a particular field. In evaluating existing research, WWC determined that Career Academies can have positive effects on staying and progressing in school.
- WWC also showed Talent Development High Schools to have potentially positive effects on progressing in school. The Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development High Schools Program is a high school reform model developed in Baltimore and has expanded to schools in 15 states, including Illinois (the school in Chicago's West Garfield Park neighborhood described above). The model incorporates a number of schoolwide strategies aimed at improving student outcomes.
- The Harlem Children's Zone project, a community-based, multilayered initiative to increase opportunities for Harlem youth, is composed of several programs that target every stage on the birth-to-career spectrum. One innovative program, Baby College, provides parenting classes for new and expecting parents in an effort to create positive learning environments that foster school readiness and literacy development from day one.

Federal Initiatives Related to Prevention. In accordance with the goal of giving all children a solid foundation for future learning, a number of federal initiatives direct resources toward prekindergarten and the early grades. Federal programs such as Head Start and Reading First support early learning, school readiness, and literacy. In addition, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) and the IDEA regulations, districts may use up to 15 percent of federal special education funds to support early intervention services such as RTI in the general education setting.

Intervention and Early Identification

Intervention and early identification strategies combine to enable educators and community members to intervene at critical points when students fall off the path to high school graduation. Although policymakers and practitioners working to curb dropping out are concerned with promoting student success by establishing a foundation for success and keeping students engaged from the early grades, they also might consider those students with pervasive issues and those with problems that manifest later in their schooling. Effective intervention and early identification initiatives can put struggling students on the path to on-time graduation and postsecondary education and employment. Therefore, states that are developing and implementing comprehensive antidropout initiatives typically support such strategies.

State and local agencies have initiated a number of intervention and early identification programs for elementary, middle, and high schools. These programs complement one another, with early identification initiatives using various types of data to identify students at risk of dropping out and intervention programs targeting those students who are identified as being at risk. Such efforts include the following:

- The use of data systems focused on academic predictors to identify students at high risk of dropping out (known as early warning data, academic risk factors, or on-track measures) in order to inform decisions
- The use of other types of student data, such as socioeconomic status and parent education level, to identify at-risk students
- Tutoring, mentoring, or advocacy programs that provide targeted support and enrichment

Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have sought effective ways to collect and use data to inform decision making. From these efforts has emerged a specific focus on how academic data such as standardized test scores can be used to identify students at risk of dropping out. Recent studies have identified academic predictors of high school graduation in tests administered as early as third grade.

Research suggests that targeted intervention programs can have a positive effect on student achievement and school completion. WWC has evaluated the evidence for several dropout programs and identified effective intervention programs.

Intervention and Early Identification in Illinois

Illinois has several policies aimed at addressing the dropout issue through intervention and early identification. Illinois was awarded a federal State Longitudinal Data System grant for fiscal year 2009. Recently passed state legislation governs the goals and administration of the award. The Illinois law specifies that the system will coordinate various state agencies involved in early childhood through higher education. Such a coordinated effort may allow the early identification of students at risk of dropping out as well as the evaluation of the effectiveness of educational interventions designed to keep students on track.

Intervention and early identification strategies are used in communities, districts, and schools throughout the state. Programs and initiatives are implemented at the state and local level and are funded by both public and private initiatives. The following are examples of Illinois intervention and early identification programs and initiatives.

- The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) is a university-affiliated research organization focused on researching educational issues in the city of Chicago. Some of CCSR's work focuses on the development and use of indicators of whether students are on track to graduate.
- The nationally recognized Big Brothers Big Sisters program has 18 agency offices throughout the state of Illinois. The program pairs adult mentors with at-risk youth.

Intervention and Early Identification in Other States

Intervention and early identification strategies around the country have taken a variety of forms. What follows is a brief description of notable programs and initiatives.

- Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) is a program shown by WWC to have potentially positive effects on both staying in school and progressing in school. The program targets middle school students and is designed to address a wide spectrum of issues that can affect dropping out, including student, school, family, and community factors. Students in the program are assigned counselors who collaborate with families and teachers and monitor student performance. In addition, students and parents receive training in problem-solving skills.
- Check & Connect is a research-based program that offers degrees of intervention, ranging from basic (for all students covered by the program) to intensive. One basic intervention is instruction in cognitive-behavioral problem-solving strategies. Intensive interventions include one-on-one mentoring and collaboration with the school administrators to find personal solutions for individual students. The program also incorporates family outreach, ongoing mentoring, and the monitoring of student data, including attendance data. WWC validated research and evaluation of the program as it has been implemented in a large urban district in Minnesota, and it concluded that the program has positive effects on staying in school and potentially positive effects on progressing in school.
- High School Redirection is an alternative high school program for at-risk students. It focuses on developing basic skills, including literacy, and it features a small-school

setting in which teachers act as both instructors and mentors. WWC determined that High School Redirection can have positive effects on progressing in school but mixed effects on staying in school.

- Twelve Together is a mentoring and peer-support program for students in middle school and early high school. The program spans one year and offers help with homework provided by college students, afterschool discussion groups, and college visitation trips. WWC found that it can have positive effects on staying in school.

Federal Initiatives Related to Intervention and Early Identification. The federal government has demonstrated a commitment to helping states develop and strengthen their longitudinal data systems. The Statewide Longitudinal Grant Program (of which Illinois was a grantee for fiscal year 2009) has been awarding grants of up to \$9 million. Since the first round of awards in 2005, 41 states and the District of Columbia have received at least one grant. In addition, one of ARRA’s “four assurances” (which will impact funding decisions under the various grant programs) is “establish and use pre-K through college and career data systems to track progress and foster continuous improvement” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009a). Another assurance, to “provid[e] intensive support and effective interventions for the lowest-performing schools” connects to the intervention aspect of this strategy.

Reengagement

Reengagement, also referred to as reentry, reconnection, retention, and recovery, encompasses strategies for helping individuals who have dropped out of school reconnect with the education system. Although any comprehensive plan to address the dropout issue hinges on efforts to prevent students from withdrawing from the system, such a plan also can include programs that work to bring back students who do leave. For those who drop out, the right reengagement initiatives can facilitate a life-changing turnaround. States confronting the dropout issue might therefore strive to develop, implement, and support effective reengagement strategies.

State and local agencies have instituted a range of efforts to help disengaged students achieve high school completion and go on to postsecondary education and employment. Such efforts include the following:

- Adult career and technical education programs
- High school equivalency test programs to prepare students for the GED
- Computer-based instruction, such as distance learning programs
- In-school programs that provide academic or social and emotional support for students who reenroll after dropping out
- Programs that grant credit toward high school completion for mastery of skills and content as opposed to actual hours of instruction (“seat time”)
- Alternative or “second-chance” schools

- Rule-based initiatives that deter students from dropping out or encourage out-of-school students to return to school through punitive measures, such as enforcing truancy laws or removing driving privileges

Ideally, reengagement programs work by helping out-of-school youth reenroll in school, graduate, and earn a high school diploma. A number of students are unable to take this traditional path to high school completion, and policymakers can work to ensure that alternative pathways are available. Affordable and flexible options can be created for individuals who are parents, who must work during the day, or who simply cannot learn in a traditional classroom environment.

There has been a growing interest among researchers and educators in identifying successful reengagement programs. Reengagement efforts are among the antidropout programs that WWC evaluated. Programs that offer participants job training and social supports in addition to high school coursework have had a demonstrated effect on completion. An increasing number of reengagement programs are incorporating technology, such as online learning programs, which allow for even more flexibility and individualization.

Reengagement in Illinois

Illinois has taken recent steps towards improving graduation outcomes through reengagement strategies. In 2004, a series of bills related to promoting high school completion were enacted. The laws promoted better recordkeeping related to students who leave school and clarified the situations under which a school or district may deny reenrollment to a student, adding protections to a student’s right to reenroll.

A 2005 legislative resolution created the Illinois Task Force on Re-enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School. The task force was charged with researching possible reengagement approaches and developing recommendations. In 2008, the task force published its report that recommended additional funding opportunities for reengagement programs. Stemming from the task force’s recommendations, legislation effective July of 2009 established the Illinois Hope and Opportunity Pathways through Education (IHOPE) Program. The goal of the grant program is to “develop a comprehensive system in this State to re-enroll significant numbers of high school dropouts in programs that will enable them to earn their high school diploma” (105 ILCS 5/2-3.66b; Illinois General Assembly, n.d.-c). The grant program is administered in addition to the existing Truants’ Alternative and Optional Education Program (TAOEP), established to award grants for purposes of funding programs that support students who are chronically absent or have left school altogether.

Reengagement strategies have been used within a number of Illinois communities. Programs and initiatives are implemented at the state and local level and are funded by both public and private initiatives. The following are examples of Illinois reengagement programs and initiatives.

- Job Corps is a federally funded program operating more than 120 residential alternative schools enrolling more than 60,000 youth ages 16–24. The program provides vocational training as well as opportunities for participants to earn a diploma or a GED. WWC

determined that Job Corps programs can have positive effects on completing school. Illinois has Job Corps sites in Chicago, Golconda, and Joliet.

- The Lincoln Challenge Academy is the Illinois branch of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program. The program, permanently authorized by Congress at 60 percent federal funding, is an alternative education program for youth (ages 16–18) who have dropped out of high school. The program offers residential and nonresidential phases, has a military academy structure, and offers academic classes. Many participants are able to earn a GED during the residential phase. The national program started in 10 states and has expanded to 29 states and Puerto Rico.
- The Illinois Virtual School (IVS) offers a range of online courses in Grades 5–12. Operated by a partnership of Regional Offices of Education and funded by a grant from the state, IVS courses may be accessed by a variety of individuals including formerly out-of-school students. Such students may take and earn credits toward a diploma, though credit is granted by a partner school, not IVS.

Reengagement in Other States

Sample State and Local Programs. Reengagement strategies implemented in other states have taken a variety of forms. What follows is a brief description of notable programs and initiatives.

- In 2004, Philadelphia formed a citywide collaborative, Project U-Turn, to combat the city’s dropout crisis. In 2008, the city opened a “Reengagement Center” funded through district, private, and federal funds to help out-of-school youth earn a high school diploma or GED.
- Numerous states offer online learning opportunities that, in many cases, allow students who have dropped out to make up credits necessary for graduation. The largest online school, the Florida Virtual School (FLVS), served more than 50,000 students in the 2006–07 school year. Nearly 20 percent of students taking courses through FLVS are doing so for credit-recovery purposes. A number of online schools outside Florida have adopted aspects of the FLVS curriculum, which has been recognized for its use of diagnostic tests to streamline instruction.
- The Los Angeles Unified School District offers high school credit-recovery courses that combine traditional instruction and individually paced online learning.
- The Johns Hopkins University’s Talent Development High Schools Program, discussed in detail above in connection with prevention strategies, includes at least one reengagement strategy—the use of alternative “twilight schools,” schools within schools that offer students the opportunity to attend during nontraditional hours.

Federal Initiatives Related to Reengagement. In addition to its support of many of the programs and initiatives described above, the federal government awards adult-education grants. This funding is authorized by the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and funds adult-education programs, including those that prepare learners for the GED.

National Foundation and Organization Websites

Recent attention to the severity and impact of the dropout crisis has encouraged research and reporting on the problem and potential solutions. Illinois policymakers may find the following Web-based resources useful.

The Alliance for Excellent Education

<http://www.all4ed.org>

America's Promise Alliance

<http://www.americaspromise.org>

Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University

<http://www.every1graduates.org>

The Harlem Children's Zone

<http://www.hcz.org>

Jobs for the Future

<http://www.jff.org>

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities

<http://www.dropoutprevention.org>

Philadelphia's Project U-Turn

<http://www.projectuturn.net>

The Urban Institute's Education Policy Center

<http://www.urban.org/center/epc/index.cfm>

Illinois Foundation and Organization Websites and Contact Information

Advance Illinois

<http://www.advanceillinois.org>

Big Brothers Big Sisters (18 agency offices statewide)

<http://www.bbbs.org>

The Consortium on Chicago School Research

<http://csr.uchicago.edu>

Illinois Education Research Council
<http://ierc.siue.edu>

Illinois Virtual School
<http://www.ilvirtual.org/>

Job Corps Centers in Illinois
<http://www.jobcorps.gov/centerlocations.aspx?statename=il>

Lincoln's ChalleNGe Academy
<http://www.ngycp.org/site/state/il/>

Selected Resources

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