

# Intervene Now So They Will Graduate Later

**D**o you want to prevent high school students from dropping out? The way to do it is to start in middle school. Students who have academic or behavior problems in the middle grades do not grow out of these tendencies once they get to high school. In fact, they are the most likely to drop out.



A recent study conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins University and the Philadelphia Education Fund found that most dropouts, at least in large cities, can be identified long before they walk the halls of high school. As early as sixth grade, four factors point to those at high risk of falling off the graduation track: poor attendance, poor behavior, or a failing grade in math or English. Students with only one of these “big four” indicators had less than a 30 percent chance of graduating on time or even in one extra year of study. In addition, the researchers found that when whole-school reforms were implemented, students’ odds of earning a diploma on time increased.

Researchers followed more than 12,000 sixth-grade students in Philadelphia schools from 1996 to 2004. “It was our theory that the combination of becoming an adolescent, moving into

new organizations of schools with more complex academic demands, and living in a high-poverty area create unique conditions which can push students off the path to high school graduation,” notes Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. “Our goal was to quantify the extent to which the seeds of success or failure are present in early middle grades, and examine the research base on possible interventions.”

## The Effect of the Big Four

Because the presence of any of the four indicators will identify 60 percent of those who will not graduate on time, researchers point out that early, targeted intervention can significantly improve graduation rates. Rather than hoping that adolescents grow out of negative attitudes toward school, edu-

cators must intervene sooner rather than later. “Early manifestation of academic and behavioral problems at the start of the middle grades do not generally self-correct,” Balfanz says. “These students do not recover. They drop out. Early intervention is not only productive, but essential.”

The study also uncovered another reason why early intervention is desirable: Nearly all sixth-grade students identified as in danger of dropping out had only one or two risk factors, whereas many struggling high school students demonstrate three or four difficulties, requiring more interventions.

**Poor Attendance.** Only 17 percent of sixth graders in the cohort with poor attendance (defined as attending school less than 80 percent of the time) graduated on time or within one year of their expected graduation date. Thus, poor attendance was found to be the greatest portent of eventual failure to graduate.

**Failing Grades in Math or English.** While poor attendance stymied student chances of graduating, researchers also found that failing either math or English was usually a precursor to failure on a grander scale. Sixth-grade students who received an F in either a math or English/reading course rarely finished high school in the district. In fact, course failure was a more accurate predictor of dropping out than low test scores.

**Poor Behavior.** In tracking the sixth-grade students, researchers discovered that a poor final behavior mark in any subject, even in the absence of any of the other big four factors, was highly predictive of dropping out. Nearly three-fourths (71 percent) of students who received one or more poor final behavior grades failed to earn a diploma on time or within one extra year.

Students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions rarely graduated on time; only two in 10 earned a diploma with their peers. Odds of dropping out increased even more for those with more than one suspension. Because nearly all suspended students also received poor final behavior grades, the two groups were statistically similar.

Educators who think poor student

behavior that stops short of suspension is little cause for concern should think again. “We found that sustained mild misbehaviors—not paying attention, not completing assignments, or talking back in class—were as significant a predictor of falling off the graduation track as an out-of-school suspension,” says Douglas Mac Iver, co-author of the study and a research scientist at Johns Hopkins University.

### Early Intervention Is Important

In a related study, Mac Iver and Balanz compared 2,000 students enrolled in schools implementing the Talent Development Middle Grades (TDMG) program to students in comparison schools. They found TDMG students had better attendance, lower failure rates, and higher graduation rates. The interventions related to effective instruction, extra help, and a more supportive climate addressed all the risk factors.

Providing the appropriate intervention in the vulnerable middle school

years ultimately can make the difference between academic success and failure. As 17th century English poet Alexander Pope noted, “’Tis education forms the common mind; just as the twig is bent, the tree’s inclined.” Thus, educators seeking to reverse the nation’s high school dropout rates would do well to implement strategies to support struggling middle school students. ■

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about this research, read “Preventing Student Disengagement in Middle Schools” under the “What’s New” section of the Johns Hopkins University Talent Development Middle Grades Web site at [www.csos.jhu.edu/tmdms](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/tmdms).

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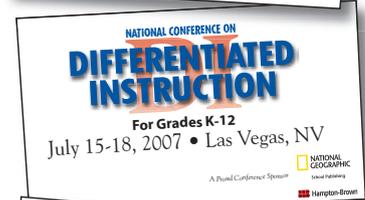
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