Considerations for Student Graduation Support Systems

In "Dropout Prevention in Middle and High Schools: From Research to Practice," Julia Wilkins and Loujeania Williams Bost argue "due to the variety of reasons students drop out, school completion must include multiple components, with efforts to increase student engagement at their core" (Wilkins, Williams Bost, 2016). Districts convening teams of educators, community partners, students and other stakeholders to identify students who may be exhibiting signs of alterable risk factors (Freeman, Simonsen 2015) and assign interventions must consider a number of factors to ensure that the components of their system are responsive, student centered and equitable.

SEL as a Universal Tier I Support

The 2017 report "Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects," Taylor, Oberle, Durlak and Weissberg, found significant evidence of sustained improvement across a variety of measures associated with student well-being. They identify five key findings from their review - three are especially relevant:

- "The first involves the durability of impacts from Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs. Students in school-based SEL interventions continued to demonstrate significant positive benefits in seven outcomes collected, on average, from 56 weeks and up to 195 weeks (i.e., 3.75 years) following program participation."
- "A second important finding involves the dual benefits of SEL interventions in terms of affecting both positive and negative indicators of well being...By fostering social and emotional skills and positive attitudes in students, the school-based, universal interventions reviewed in this study achieved these ends during follow-up in terms of significantly improving skills, positive attitudes, pro-social behavior and academic performance. These programs were also able to serve as a protective factor against the development of subsequent problems (i.e., conduct problems, emotional distress, and drug use)."
- "Third, the SEL approach to PYD was beneficial for all demographic groups that we were able to examine in this review. Consistent positive effects at follow-up were found for SEL interventions with student populations from different racial groups and socioeconomic statuses, and for both domestic and international student bodies...However, although we did not find differential effects among groups, this should not be interpreted as an endorsement that "one size fits all" when it comes to SEL intervention. It is critical that program developers and researchers examine strategies to design and implement interventions in culturally competent ways (Hecht & Shin, 2015; Hoffman, 2009)."

Careful Selection of Evaluation Data

Student support teams must be intentional in selecting data to analyze when identifying students for intervention. Relying solely on subjective measures such as office discipline referrals (ODRs) will reinforce existing inequities, marginalize students of color (Skiba et al, 2011) and prevent students with internalizing behaviors from receiving the support they need (Bruhn, Lane, and Hirsch, 2014).

In "A Review of Tier 2 Interventions Conducted Within Multi-tiered Models of Behavioral Prevention," Bruhn, Lane, and Hirsch state "the key to identification is having measures that paint an accurate picture of the student" (Bruhn et al, 2014). They extend the literature on Tier 1 interventions, stating:

"We recognize the benefit of data triangulation in identifying and supporting students for Tier 2 interventions. The idea is that schools can target specific academic deficits through Tier 2 interventions, as well as provide the behavioral support necessary for students to access the academic instruction based on data gleaned from multiple sources. This is particularly important given the limitations of

using ODRs or systematic screeners alone. For example, there is still concern about (a) the variation among teachers in total ODRs generated, (b) the inability of ODRs to identify students with internalizing behaviors, and (c.) the 'wait-to-fail' method for identifying students needing extra support" (Bruhn et. al 2014).

While recognizing that "questions remain regarding the practicality and feasibility of conducting screeners," Bruhn and her colleagues advocate "triangulating ODRs, systematic screeners, and qualitative data (e.g. surveys, faculty discussions) to refine and develop interventions." (Marchant et al, 2009).

Consider Alternative Perspectives

The Regional Education Lab-Central's 2011 report "A Review of Literature on Implementing an Early Warning System" states that student support teams must draw upon a variety of stakeholders:

Districts in the early stages of implementing an EWS, or other strategies for dropout prevention and graduation improvement, should consider establishing a team comprised of key members from local government agencies, local community representatives, district and school staff, and parents and students (Balfanz et al, 2009; MetisNet, 2008). For example, Shelton School District (n.d.) created a team comprised of a cross-section of members of the school community, including the superintendent, principals, counselors, learning support staff, school nurses, teachers, CTE, tribal representatives, juvenile court representatives, school psychologists, special education professionals, drug and alcohol intervention specialists, and research and data specialists.

While this coalition represents essential perspectives and expertise, there is one notable omission - students who the system failed to support. Decoteau J. Irby and Lynnette Mawhinney's 2014 article "Strategy Development for Urban Dropout Prevention: Partnering with Formerly Incarcerated Adult Noncompleters" documented a community-based research project that utilized focus groups and interviews "to gain insights about the experience of dropouts from adult noncompleters who experienced incarceration with hopes of using the insights to reimagine dropout prevention strategies and efforts" (Irby& Mawhinney, 2014). The authors constructed a theoretical framework around standpoint theory, which "rests on the assumption that a group of people's stigmatized, marginalized, and/or subordinated social locations and experiences confer them with unique insights into a society's ruling apparatus."

They argue that these "perspectives from the margins are more capable of challenging the status quo than the perspectives of relatively more privileged groups...because privileged groups often 'do not know, or are invested in not knowing, or are invested in systematically ignoring or denying' (Wylie, 2003, p.32) certain societal truths that pose fundamental challenges to their privileged positions." They conclude their framework by asserting "there is power in the collective voices, insights, and narratives of people who understand life at the intersection of societal margins. The fact that perspectives of marginalized adults are muted in dominant school improvement efforts may be part of why dropout prevention efforts in urban contexts remain minutely successful at best" (Irby & Mahwhinney, 2014).

The researchers facilitated a process in which study participants drawn from alumni of a support group for formerly incarcerated individuals identified and evaluated factors relating to dropout: "The group described policies of government, in-school factors, and race, class, and ethnicity as important factors to consider when developing dropout prevention strategies." The study culminated in an exchange between participants and school and community stakeholders. Based upon their experiences of dropout and incarceration, as well as the dialog in their previous focus groups, the study participants asked stakeholders:

1.   What structures are in place for making mental health resources available to families and youth in public schools?

2.   What community-school linkages exist in schools around the dropout problem, and what stakeholder(s) are responsible for taking the lead in forging these linkages?

3.   If most agree that social issues are the problem/catalyst for students dropping out, then why do many strategies remain focused on school improvement?

Dialog around these questions "reinforced alumni beliefs that efforts to address the dropout problem should be grounded within community-based settings." One participant asserted that they have a unique perspective that can be utilized as an asset in dropout prevention efforts. He stated:

We're able to reach places where other people are not able to reach. We have a stake in this community, actually doing things with these people out in these communities. They're really more able to talk to us about whatever's going on. So if we can devise something that we can work with the guidance counselors, truancy officers, if they can give us these people's names and addresses we can actually go to these houses to build rapport, you know what I'm saying?

They might not want to have an agency come in, but they know me from the neighborhood...We try to assess their situation and work as a network...We want to all meet together, and then we'll go on from there. That's how it could work.

This case study narrative offers compelling evidence that the knowledge, skills and community connections of adults whom the educational and governmental systems failed to support have a great deal to offer schools' efforts to help vulnerable students meet their potential.