

4 Multiple Pathways for Student Success

The Urban Education Task Force recommends implementing a number of steps to create multiple pathways to graduation and postsecondary success for young people, such as partnerships with adult education programs, access to AP courses, and courses offered at nontraditional times.

Introduction

Rhode Island is facing a crisis of completion in our urban districts. The Rhode Island urban district dropout rate is 26 percent, compared with a statewide rate of 16 percent. Students in all racial and ethnic groups in urban districts have high dropout rates, ranging from 24 percent of Black students to 29 percent of Native American students. Rhode Island data show that male students, low-income students (receiving free or reduced-price meals), students receiving special education services, and English language learners are particularly likely to drop out (see figures 4 and 5 in appendix 4S). National research shows that teen parents and youth in the foster care system are also more likely to drop out than their peers.

Students' need for engaging curriculum, involvement with at least one concerned adult, and a path to opportunity begins in the middle grades. Intervening with students who are struggling in the middle grades and who are identifiably at risk for low academic achievement and for dropping out is both less expensive and more effective than later remediation. Both struggling students and those who require greater academic challenges or a clear career path need to be engaged early on. Student involvement in the process of career exploration and choosing their personal pathways is critical to this work. Ideally, an individual grad-

uation plan commences in the sixth grade, so that levels of support and individualized pathways can be designed before the student begins high school.

A proficiency-based education system like Rhode Island's focuses on knowledge and skill development for high school graduation, college preparation and readiness, and employment and career success. The multiple pathways approach includes, but goes beyond, academic proficiency to provide a variety of opportunities and supports for students, particularly those who are struggling in the traditional system, so that all students can graduate from high school and enter meaningful postsecondary education, training, and/or work opportunities.

The Rhode Island education system is going through a time of re-envisioning and reform. Urban districts are implementing wide-scale middle and high school reform efforts in collaboration with RIDE. It is critical to support these efforts at the state and local levels, as it is only through ensuring that the highways of education (our traditional schools) are effective that we can ensure that all students have the potential and equal opportunity for success. In addition to this work, it is necessary to create a safety net for our urban students who are most at risk of dropping out of school through the creation of core alternative pathways.

The U.S. Department of Education has identified essential elements of dropout prevention and treatment that include the use of data, personalization of the school environment, and the development of alternatives for students who are not succeeding in or who have trouble participating in traditional schools (Dynarski et al. 2008; see appendix 4S). None of this can be accomplished without professional development for teachers and administrators on how to support students every step of the way to graduation.

Promising Work under way in Rhode Island

RIDE and Rhode Island’s urban districts are currently implementing middle and high school personalization efforts based on the Board of Regents’ new middle and high school regulations and the new Basic Education Program (BEP) regulations. These regulations provide for a number of “prevention” mechanisms, including small learning environments, connections with at least one responsible adult, and academic supports for struggling students who remain within the comprehensive school.

The BEP also requires that each local education agency (LEA) implement a systematic problem-solving approach to address student issues that may interfere with success. This approach uses teams that analyze data on student attendance, disciplinary actions, grades, and course completion. These teams then develop LEA-specific interventions targeted at identified student needs, including interventions both in and out of school as part of students’ Individual Learning Plans. Moving forward, efforts that include strategies to increase parent and community involvement will be critical to the success of this work.

Recommendations, Action Steps, and Partner Responsibilities

Based on state and national data and research on promising practices to support student educational success, the Task Force offers the following recommendations to address the needs of Rhode Island’s urban students.

Using Data to Intervene Early

National research has identified the risk factors that can best predict whether students will drop out of high school. Schools and districts can decrease dropout rates by having systems in

place to comprehensively identify a majority of those at risk for dropping out and then implement multiple strategies to support each student on their path to graduation. This includes preventative interventions for at-risk populations, as well as recovery programs for populations that are off-track for graduation. According to the National High School Center (www.betterhighschools.org), the following indicators have been identified as the most valuable for identifying who is most likely to drop out:

- poor grades in core subjects
- low attendance
- failure to be promoted to the next grade
- disengagement in the classroom, including behavioral problems (e.g., a poor final behavior grade for the year)

RECOMMENDATION Support districts in creating early warning systems that can be used to identify middle school and high school students at risk of dropping out. Provide tailored supports to students identified using the early warning system and track these students to ensure that they get back on track for graduation within a reasonable amount of time.

RIDE and its partners should use the building blocks that exist in the RIDE data warehouse and the district information systems to develop this model and train local educators and administrators in using the early warning system. The early warning system can be used to identify many students who are at risk of dropping out as early as sixth grade and those who are struggling with the transition from eighth to ninth grade.

Action Steps

- ◆ Identify which districts are already using early warning systems.

- ◆ Develop a protocol in which RIDE can support districts in implementing early warning systems and monitor their success.
- ◆ Create opportunities and incentives for districts to collaborate in the development of early warning systems.
- ◆ Ensure that these data follow the child if and when the child transfers schools.

Alternatives for Students in the Middle Grades

All students deserve high-quality and enriching middle grade experiences, and most middle-level students do not need intensive interventions and alternative settings as much as targeted and thoughtful supports based on student needs and risk factors. For students who do need more intensive supports, access to appropriate alternatives to the traditional junior high and middle school models becomes essential. Note that alternative middle-level models are not limited to behavior programs, but can also provide a variety of academic and other supports to struggling students in grades 6 through 8.

Aggregate data already show that middle-level students in urban districts are performing less well, have been held back more, and are in school less frequently than suburban students in Rhode Island, putting them at increased risk of becoming dropouts. On any given day, an average of almost 10 percent of urban students were absent (see appendix 4S).

RECOMMENDATION *Develop more alternatives to the traditional middle school and junior high school models so that all children have reasonable access to schools that are built around the needs of students who are “exceptions to the rule” and are struggling in their schools.*

Developing more alternatives could be accomplished by expanding access to educational models with proven track records of

increasing student success at the middle level, with a focus on building on local successes and existing programs, and by exploring emerging national models that have successfully worked with struggling students in the middle grades. These alternatives could be developed through the Innovation Zone, described in section 7.

Action Steps

- ◆ Expand access to the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program (UCAP), an acceleration program for urban middle school students from participating Rhode Island districts who are at risk of dropping out due to grade retention. UCAP accelerates students who are behind in school to get them back on track for timely graduation with students their age, allowing students in grades 7, 8, and 9 to complete three years’ worth of work in two school years.
- ◆ Explore the use of expanded learning time models (see the recommendations on expanded learning time), other out-of-school-time programs such as the Providence After School Alliance, models such as City Year, and programs such as the College Crusade that can support student learning at the middle level.
- ◆ Support cross-district and regional conversations about increasing access to alternative middle-level models for urban students in Rhode Island.
- ◆ Explore public and private funding options at the local, state, and federal levels for expanding access to alternative middle school models for urban students in Rhode Island.

Multiple Pathways for High School Students

All students in Rhode Island deserve timely access to opportunities for a meaningful high school education that fits their individual needs. Due to the critical importance of a high school diploma for accessing future educational opportunities and for meaningful workforce participation, students most at risk of dropping out of high school are of particular concern. Urban students are more likely than students from more affluent districts to struggle in school and are the primary focus of the work of the Task Force. While eventually all students in Rhode Island will have access to multiple pathways to high school completion, it is critical to start by ensuring access to multiple pathways for the students who need them most.

Youth in Rhode Island's urban core are struggling; more than a quarter (26 percent) of students in the class of 2008 in Rhode Island's urban districts dropped out of high school. Studies show that students leave high school before completion because they are not engaged (often due to limited access to challenging curricula or lack of connection with at least one concerned adult in the school), have poor attendance, face other barriers to academic success (like English-language difficulties or special education needs), have behavior problems or family responsibilities that interfere with participation in traditional school models, and/or have fallen significantly behind in their course work. English language learners pose a particular challenge for the urban districts where they are concentrated, as they often need intensive academic assistance as well as cultural assimilation supports and basic English language instruction (see appendix 4S).

During the 2008-2009 school year, 12 percent of urban ninth-graders in Rhode Island were two or more grades below normal for their

age, 9 percent of tenth-graders were over age for their grade, 5 percent of eleventh-graders were over age, and 6 percent of twelfth-graders were over age. Research has shown that students who are retained in school or who have trouble achieving the necessary credits to stay on schedule for graduation are more likely than their peers to drop out (Kennelly & Monrad 2007; National High School Center at AIR Web site; full references in appendix 4S). Models that help these students stay in school, catch up on credits, and graduate on time with their peers are essential for assisting a large group of urban students to complete high school successfully.

We also know that the adult education system is experiencing growth in its population of young adults: from fiscal year 2007 through fiscal year 2008, there was an increase of 15 percent in the number of students between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four. In the current program year, young adults represent 31 percent of all learners enrolled in Adult Basic Education programs. These programs meet a small fraction of the need, as there are 14,975 individuals age eighteen to twenty-four in Rhode Island who lack a high school credential. Finally, in 2008, 75 percent of all GED graduates were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four.

Rhode Island's urban districts are involved in essential reform efforts to make all high schools places where rigorous learning, growth, and exploration take place, regardless of the student demographics. The state should continue to support this process, continuing to maintain the focus on personalizing learning and the learning environment for all students, universal access to college preparatory curricula (including AP courses and dual enrollment

opportunities), and access to approved career and technical education aligned with industry standards.

The Rhode Island BEP regulations have laid the groundwork for the creation of multiple pathways through the requirement that each district establish alternative programs in partnership with community agencies that include strategies differing from traditional programs. Districts are also required to work with RIDE to ensure that older English language learners who cannot graduate with their cohort have age-appropriate English as a second language opportunities through approved high-quality programs.

Nationally, there are a number of models of successful alternative pathways for students who struggle in traditional high schools and who would benefit from non-traditional educational opportunities (including the New York City Department of Education's Office of Multiple Pathways and Vermont's Department of Education High School Completion Model). Developing these types of alternatives to traditional high schools for Rhode Island students who may be struggling and for those who would otherwise benefit from a diverse array of high school options will increase the number of Rhode Island youth who graduate from high school prepared to succeed in post-secondary education and the workforce.

The following recommendation envisions a range of recuperative and restorative strategies for in- and out-of-school youth. These programs could function across urban districts, thus focusing resources and creating targeted strategies for those individuals in each district who could benefit from these approaches.

RECOMMENDATION Develop a Multiple Pathways for Student Success Initiative at RIDE, in consultation with the Rhode Island Office of Higher Education and the Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training. The initiative should build on the new BEP elements that address multiple pathways and will be responsible for supporting, coordinating, and monitoring state and district efforts to develop key alternative high school opportunities for Rhode Island's urban students who are struggling in the traditional high school system. The initiative will also be responsible for developing a research-based "on track to graduation" measure that can be applied to each district and monitored annually.

Multiple-pathways alternative high school models will be most successful if they are embedded in existing district structures and if they develop cross-system capacity to provide wrap-around supports for students at greatest risk of dropping out. Potential models include:

- statewide or regional Newcomers Academy or other programs to help older English language learners and newcomer youth learn English and achieve meaningful high school credentials;
- alternative completion models for students who have too few credits to complete high school in a timely manner and for students who have family or personal obligations requiring them to attend school during non-traditional hours or study with flexible timing.

The development of these models can be based on the New York City Department of Education transfer schools for over-age, under-credited students, as well as on the Vermont high school completion model that allows students to access a menu of services provided both by their districts and by local adult education agencies (see appendix 4S).

Also, the initiative could explore opportunities for providing high school credit to students who take advantage of distance learning and e-learning opportunities.

Action Steps

- ▶ Investigate private foundation and grant funding and investment from the Governor's Workforce Board Rhode Island through its Youth Development Committee to support this initiative at RIDE and the work of the districts in implementing these alternatives. Explore existing state models for funding these types of alternative schools when they are regional or cross-district partnerships (e.g., state-operated schools like the MET, charter schools, or educational collaboratives).
- ▶ Meet with urban district leadership to prioritize the elements of this work and to develop an action plan for creating more high school alternatives in Rhode Island.
- ▶ Explore Rhode Island and additional national promising practices that can be used as a basis for this work going forward, such as:
 - Diploma Program at Aquidneck Island Learning Center: A credit recovery model where students missing one or two years of credit can focus on those courses and receive a Rogers High School diploma.
 - Providence Career and Technical Academy Second Day for Learning Initiative: Out-of-school youth will have access to the new academy and to GED preparation services.
 - Woonsocket Feinstein E-Learning Academy: An individualized credit recovery program with online courses.
 - The Check and Connect Model: Developed in Minnesota with a focus on districtwide high school dropout prevention programming.

Access to College and College Preparation

College access and preparation is the main pathway to student success. The unequal expectations in our urban schools about who should attend college deprive many of our youth (particularly urban youth) of the opportunity to attend post-secondary institutions. A statewide commitment to the idea that all students deserve the right to equal access and opportunity for higher education is essential to ensuring that all students in our state graduate from high school prepared for higher education and the workplace with the tools and information they need to make college a reality in their lives.

Rhode Island has recently joined in a partnership with other New England states to form the New England Secondary School Consortium. Goals of the Consortium include increasing state graduation rates to 90 percent, decreasing the dropout rate to less than 1 percent, increasing the percentage of students who enroll in college to 80 percent, and reducing the percentage of college students who need remedial courses in college to 5 percent. To reach these ambitious goals, Rhode Island needs to work together with the other states and start immediately with a commitment to increasing college access for *all* students in Rhode Island, including those in urban districts who traditionally are less likely to attend post-secondary education institutions.

Any college access work in Rhode Island should build upon existing efforts and organizations, including supporting the work being done through the Rhode Island Office of Higher Education Early College Access initiatives, such as:

- summer dual enrollment scholarships to expose high school students to college curriculum early;

- financial support for high school students enrolled in college courses taught at the high school through the Rhode Island College Early Enrollment Program;
- highlighting opportunities at the Community College of Rhode Island such as the High School Enrichment program or Running Start;
- focusing on comprehensive programs such as the Pathways to College program, a summer college experience between the University of Rhode Island and Central Falls High School, or the Pathways through College program, a model designed to offer high school seniors the opportunity complete fifteen to thirty credits toward college while simultaneously completing high school graduation requirements.

We must also encourage ongoing collaboration and communication between the Office of Higher Education and RIDE, particularly encouraging the development of shared policy to direct these efforts. This work should also use the resources available through the Way to Go Rhode Island Web portal administered by the Rhode Island Higher Education Assistance Authority.

RECOMMENDATION Create a statewide college access working group which would include, at minimum: RIDE, the Rhode Island Office of Higher Education, representatives from school districts, educators, public and private higher-education institutions, the Rhode Island School Counselors Association, college access programs, college disability support services programs, community organizations working on college access issues, and students and their families to develop and coordinate a post-secondary access agenda for the state.

This working group would be tasked with addressing issues that include, but are not limited to:

- improving professional development related to post-secondary education for middle and high school staff to give them the tools to help students to access higher-education opportunities after graduation;
- increasing student access to financial preparation information to help them plan for ways to make college a reality;
- improving communication and access to information about accessing higher education in urban communities to better inform parents and youth (many of whom may be the first generation in their families to attend college) about college opportunity, access, and success;
- building on efforts that already exist and work with families, community-based organizations, and school staff to create collaborative structures that support schools in providing all students with access to college;
- setting goals and monitor progress on indicators of college access (including, but not limited to PSAT registration and SAT fee waivers requested and used by low-income students, college application and matriculation rates, access to advanced placement and other college preparatory coursework).

Action Step

- Create a statewide college access working group, identify funding, and appoint chair(s) to convene the group.

Accountability and Sustainability

In meetings with district representatives, college access specialists, community-based providers, advocates, and staff from RIDE and the Rhode Island Office of Higher Education, it became clear that the conversations around the topic of reducing the dropout rate and improving student success have only just started to happen on a statewide scale, in large part due to the Task Force efforts. The initial groundwork laid in the development of these recommendations will provide a roadmap for future dropout prevention work and will help Rhode Island to build a public education system where all students graduate from high school ready to take the next steps in their educational and professional lives.

The next steps for Rhode Island in developing meaningful strategies and interventions to assist all students to be successful throughout high school and into life beyond include developing more-specific action steps, identifying who is responsible for taking on this work, and developing benchmarks to track success and enable educators and those in local communities who partner on this work to continually improve the educational opportunities offered to Rhode Island's urban students.

The opportunity to address some of these questions was an essential element of the Rhode Island Dropout Prevention Summit, sponsored by the America's Promise Alliance as part of a national initiative to improve educational outcomes for youth. The Rhode Island summit was held on October 8, 2009, and was convened by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. (More information on the summits at <www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Dropout-Prevention.aspx>)

As identified in each of the above recommendations, there are promising Rhode Island efforts in all of these areas that can be used as building blocks for moving forward with this work.

More needs to be done to identify funding opportunities that can support the development of each of these components of the work. The following funding opportunities should be explored: federal Department of Education grants; federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (stimulus) funds, including Race to the Top funds; federal and Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training funds; private foundation funding; funding from Rhode Island businesses as part of investing in the future Rhode Island workforce; and reallocations of existing state and local education funding to prioritize critical elements of this work.