

# Meeting the Challenge:

## Promising Practices for Reducing the Dropout Rate in Massachusetts Schools and Districts

### Introduction

Nationally, nearly one-third of students do not graduate from high school. At a time when a high school diploma is vital to students' ability to earn a living and support a family, it is unconscionable to stand by while such large numbers of students drop out of high school.

National and local research clearly documents that high school dropouts face a Sisyphean challenge in securing a well-paying job in the evermore competitive global job market. Moreover, they are generally less healthy, die earlier, less likely to wed, more likely to become parents when they are very young, more at-risk of involvement with the criminal justice system, and more likely to need social welfare assistance.<sup>1</sup>

The dire consequences of students dropping out do not solely impact the dropouts themselves. Because dropouts earn significantly less than high school or college graduates, they have a profound and negative effect on the American economy. It is estimated that the approximately 1.2 million dropouts who should have graduated with the Class of 2007 will cost the nation nearly \$329 billion in lost revenue over the course of their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Addressing the problem of students dropping out is complex; there are no easy answers or simple solutions. Research has shown that there are multiple reasons for students dropping out of high school and these vary from student to student.<sup>3</sup> While academic challenges are often part of the reason for students dropping out, there are other factors. In Massachusetts, more than half of the students who drop out have already passed the tenth grade Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam required for high school graduation. Poverty is a critical non-academic factor in many students leaving school; indeed national researchers have reported that socioeconomic status is the leading indicator for dropping out.<sup>4</sup> Economic and academic challenges along with other factors interact with one another and often have a cumulative affect on students' decision to remain in school or drop out. Despite these challenges, the majority of dropouts are motivated to persist toward a degree. Currently, 60 percent of dropouts eventually do earn a high school credential—in most cases a GED certificate.<sup>5</sup> If such large

1 Alliance for Excellent Education (2008). *The High Cost of High School Dropouts What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools*; Boston Private Industry Council (2008). *Summary of Three Reports on the Social and Fiscal Consequences of the Dropout Crisis*.

2 Alliance for Excellent Education (2008). *The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools*.

3 Allensworth, E. (2005). *Graduation and Dropout Trends in Chicago: A look at cohorts of students from 1991 through 2004*. Consortium on Chicago School Research; IES Practice Guide: Dropout Prevention (2008).

4 Cheryl A. Almeida, Cassius O. Johnson, and Adria Steinberg (2006). *Making Good on a Promise: What Policymakers Can Do to Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts*. Boston: Jobs for the Future.

5 Ibid.

populations of dropouts can persevere to earn a GED, it seems clear that there is an opportunity for high schools to capitalize on this motivation and keep students in school and on a path toward a diploma.

While it is clearly necessary to analyze the reasons that students drop out of school in order to best address these students' needs, schools and districts must also identify the specific and effective actions schools can take to help students stay in school. If the Commonwealth hopes to make progress toward ensuring that all students earn a high school diploma and are prepared for college and careers, educators and policymakers must learn from those who have begun to develop and implement effective interventions both to keep students in school, and to enable those students who have left to return and complete high school.

This brief is intended to identify policies, programs, and practices in schools that have steadily made progress in reducing their dropout rates over the past four school years. It is intended to be useful to educators in high schools and middle schools, superintendents and school committees, and state policymakers. While many of the strategies named in this report will already be familiar to those who have been focused on addressing the dropout crisis, the intended value of this report is to provide real-world examples of Massachusetts schools and districts where these policies and practices have taken hold and appear to be effective.

## Participating Districts and Schools

### Boston Public Schools

- Brighton High School
- Excel High School
- Fenway High School

### Fitchburg Public Schools

- Fitchburg High School

### Lowell Public Schools

- Lowell High School

### Pittsfield Public Schools

- Taconic High School

### Plymouth Public Schools

- Plymouth South High School

### Somerset Public Schools

- Somerset High School

### Tantasqua Regional School District

- Tantasqua Regional Senior High School

### Taunton Public Schools

- Taunton High School

### Worcester Public Schools

- Worcester South High School

## Methodology

This study is based on interviews with school leaders and district administrators from 11 high schools in nine Massachusetts school districts that have demonstrated successful reduction of their dropout rates. The process for selecting schools for this study involved four steps. First, we selected districts that have been making steady progress in reducing the dropout rate over at least three of the past four consecutive school years. Next, school districts were rank ordered based on their average change in dropout rate over a four year period (from school years 2003-2004 to 2006-2007). We found 27 districts that had an average decrease in their dropout rate of more than two percentage points over that period of time. Third, from those 27 districts, we selected the ones with the largest populations of students at greatest risk for dropping out and that were making greater progress than expected.<sup>6</sup> Twelve districts were identified through this process. Of the 12 selected districts, seven agreed to participate.<sup>7</sup> Four of these districts have more than one high school; in each of those districts one high school was invited to participate in the study. Table 1 provides the average dropout rates of the districts and schools included in this study.

Table 2 shows the average demographic characteristics of the districts selected using the process described above. Most of these districts had small populations of minority and low-income students—two categories of students at greatest

6 The percentage of students receiving free/reduced school lunch was used as a proxy for students at-risk for dropping out. Percentage of students receiving free/reduced lunch was used to predict change in four-year dropout rate. Districts whose actual change in dropout rate was better than predicted were identified as candidates for inclusion in the study.

7 During the interviewing phase of the project we learned that one of the districts selected for this study had reporting changes that reduced the number of dropouts. Pittsfield used to report student-level data to ESE for four different high schools including an alternative school and a vocational high school. But in 2005 after determining that Pittsfield was inappropriately reporting alternative and vocational enrollments (vocational students are only enrolled in Taconic and Pittsfield High School), ESE changed the codes to identify just two high schools in Pittsfield.

risk for dropping out. As a result, our fourth and final step was to include two of Massachusetts' largest school districts, Boston and Worcester, in the study to represent districts with large minority and low-income student populations. In Boston and Worcester, we identified individual schools that have been making progress in reducing the dropout rate over the last three years and invited these schools to participate. Table 2 shows the average demographic characteristics of the participating schools in Boston and Worcester.

Research for this study was conducted using structured phone interviews with school leaders and district administrators. A complete list of interview questions can be found in Appendix C. Twenty interviews were conducted: nine with superintendents and/or central office staff and 11 with principals and/or headmasters. A complete list of interviewees can be found in Appendix B. This study is based on relatively brief interviews with school and district leaders. Consequently, this brief does not represent a comprehensive portrait of all the programs and strategies that effect dropouts. The brief is intended to identify common themes among districts and schools that are reducing their dropout rates and to highlight a few of the programs that leaders have found to be effective.

**Table 1: Average dropout rates for all selected districts and schools<sup>8</sup>**

	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
Selected Districts (7 schools)	6.1%	5.8%	4.6%	3.8%
Schools in Boston & Worcester (4 schools)	8.3%	7.8%	8.3%	6.6%
State Average	3.7%	3.8%	3.3%	3.8%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

**Table 2: 2007-2008 Demographic characteristics of all selected districts and schools**

	RACE/ETHNICITY					OTHER SUBGROUPS		
	African American	Asian	Hispanic	White	Other/Multi Racial	First Language Not English	Special Education	Low-Income
Selected Districts (7 schools)	7%	7%	13%	72%	2%	16%	13%	36%
Schools in Boston & Worcester (4 schools)	33%	10%	38%	17%	1%	43%	20%	70%
State Average	8%	5%	14%	71%	2%	15%	17%	30%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

## What is the dropout rate and how is it calculated?

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) uses the dropout measure developed by the U.S. Department of Education (US ED) to calculate the dropout rates.<sup>9</sup> According to US ED, a dropout is defined as a student in grades 9 through 12 who leaves school prior to graduation for reasons other than to transfer to another school, and does not re-enroll before the following October 1. Dropout rate is the frequency that a dropout occurs within a defined population. ESE calculates the annual dropout rate as the number of students who drop out of school over a one-year period, minus the number of returned dropouts (final dropout count), divided by the grade 9 through

<sup>8</sup> For both Tables 1 and 2, the data reported is aggregated district data, except for Boston and Worcester, for which we report aggregate school data for the participating schools.

<sup>9</sup> Please note that in 2004-2005 and 2006-2007 there were two significant modifications to Massachusetts' data collection in the Student Information Management System (SIMS). For details on these modifications as they relate to the dropout rate calculations, please see the ESE report, High School Dropouts 2006-07: Massachusetts Public Schools: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/0607/summary.doc>

12 enrollment as of October 1, and multiplied by 100. (Please see equation below.) Through the US ED measurement, students who drop out during a particular reporting year but return to school, graduate, or receive a GED by October 1 of the following year are not counted in the final dropout count.

$$\text{Annual dropout rate} = \frac{\text{Final dropout count}}{\text{October 2006 Grade 9-12 enrollment}} * 100$$

*Example:*

$$\text{State annual dropout rate for 2006-07} = \frac{11,436}{298,033} * 100 = 3.8 \%$$

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/0607/default.html>)

## Themes from Participating Schools

Some of the schools participating in this study are in their third year of focused efforts to address the needs of students at-risk for dropping out while one has been doing this work for 25 years.<sup>10</sup> The majority of the selected schools (six of eleven) initiated programs to target dropouts in 2004 or 2005. Many of these schools were responding to ESE's reporting of their dropout rates and/or alarming declines in student attendance.

School leaders noted various reasons for students dropping out of school—the most commonly mentioned reason was students' home/family issues. Interviewees reported that many of their at-risk students felt pressure to work to support their families. One principal explained, "Many of these kids are under pressure from their families to drop out." The second most referenced reasons for students dropping out were: 1) that students were struggling academically, and 2) that they were "bored" or not engaged in school. In order to address these issues, the schools studied here have developed a range of initiatives and policies aimed at identifying and preventing students from dropping out. Importantly, all of the schools included in this study employed multiple strategies for addressing the needs of potential dropouts.

This section describes the initiatives most frequently mentioned by the participating schools. It is notable that the strategies and practices that emerged from our research are consistent with national research conducted on reducing dropouts.<sup>11</sup>

### Use of Data to Identify Students At-Risk of Dropping Out

The majority (8 of 11) of the schools in this study mentioned the importance of the use of data to identify students who are likely to drop out, to set goals for reaching these students, and to monitor progress in improving the outcomes of these students. The principals of Taconic High School in Pittsfield and Brighton High School in Boston both stated that having more data to identify potential dropouts helped them to make the case to parents, the community, and faculty that the school was not serving these students well. According to Brighton High's Headmaster Toby Romer, looking at the data "allowed these students to not be invisible." Once the Brighton faculty saw the numbers, "there was a community-wide value on these students." Principal Douglas McNally at Taconic High in Pittsfield recommends that principals who are just beginning to formulate a strategy for dropouts "look at the real data. Re-do it yourself if you have to." The following are the three most commonly mentioned uses of data: early indicators of potential dropouts; attendance rates in high school; and measuring the success of interventions.

<sup>10</sup> Fenway High in Boston was established 25 years ago for the purpose of keeping students in school. It grew out of a program at Boston's English High School and was designed to provide a more personalized environment.

<sup>11</sup> See IES Practice Guide: Dropout Prevention, September 2008 ([http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/dp\\_pg\\_090308.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/dp_pg_090308.pdf)).

- **Early Indicators of Potential Dropouts.** Consistent with national research, most of the schools selected for this study analyzed early warning indicators in order to identify potential dropouts.<sup>12</sup> Seven of the eleven school leaders stated that they looked at the characteristics of their students prior to entry into ninth grade in order to isolate those most at-risk of dropping out. Pittsfield Public Schools looks at students' characteristics such as academic scores as far back as middle school and attendance since the fifth grade. The early warning indicators that were most commonly mentioned included:
  - Academic failures in middle school and/or junior high
  - Attendance rates in middle school and/or junior high
  - Suspension rates in middle school and/or junior high
  
- **High School Attendance.** All of the schools in this study used high school attendance rates to gauge the risk of students for dropping out. Several schools have attendance officers that monitor students' attendance, prevent them from skipping school, and track them down or notify their parents when they do not attend. At Excel High School in Boston, the parent coordinator monitors all attendance-related data: tardiness, missing class, going to the nurse, serving detention, and suspensions. If a student has been absent for two to three consecutive days, the parent coordinator calls the student's parent. If the parent is unreachable, the coordinator goes to the student's home. In the first three months of the school year, Excel's parent coordinator had conducted 12 home visits. At South High in Worcester, Principal Maureen Binienda has "attendance" meetings every Tuesday. At these meetings, she, the guidance counselors, and the adjustment counselors go through the entire absence list. The team reaches out to the parents of those students with more than five absences, doing home visits if the parents do not respond by phone. Lowell High has developed "Operation Attendance." Each week staff members place calls to the homes of students who have unexcused absences to let them know their children have not been in school.
  
- **Measuring Success.** Many of the schools interviewed also relied on data to gauge their progress in meeting the needs of students at-risk for dropping out. The following are some of the most commonly referenced data sources monitored:
  - **Attendance Rates.** Four of the schools interviewed mentioned setting goals for attendance. At some schools there was a focus on raising their annual attendance rate, while others set daily attendance goals. Worcester South has a daily attendance goal of 90 percent against which they track student progress.
  - **Academic Progress.** Four schools mentioned monitoring students' academic indicators. Taconic High uses benchmark data for students as they progress, conducting uniform subject midterms and end of year exams. Taconic has also established goals related to their students' Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and SAT performance, which they constantly monitor. Worcester South issues academic progress reports every five weeks so that students do not have to wait for their report cards to know how they are doing. This allows students to see where their performance is weak and to get the help they need before they fall too far behind.

## Targeted Interventions

Once schools identified students that were most at-risk for dropping out, they all developed targeted interventions to try to address the risk factors and help students engage in school and get back on track toward graduation. At Brighton High School, the faculty reviewed their dropout rate data and early risk indicators, and then convened faculty "study groups" to develop instructional strategies for struggling students. Before beginning, faculty study groups interviewed students to find out what interventions the students thought would be most helpful to them.

The following are the most commonly referenced interventions among the 11 schools included in the study: personalization and building a sense of community; academic supports; wrap-around services; advisory programs for special populations; and support for the transition to ninth grade.

<sup>12</sup> In a report that reviews current research, Achieve argues that the most cost-effective way of preventing dropouts is to invest in the development of an "early warning system" of data collection on which to base the development of interventions. Jerald, C. (2006). Identifying potential dropouts: Key lessons for building an early warning data system. Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc.

- **Personalization and Building a Sense of Community.** Consistent with prior national and state research, all schools mentioned the need to “personalize” school for students. Personalization was most often described as building stronger relationships between at-risk students and at least one adult at school. In addition, personalization included building stronger student to student relationships through peer mentoring programs. Plymouth South Principal Patricia Connors stated, “It all comes down to relationships. If we can show students that someone cares, we can stop them from dropping out.” Schools have taken different routes to foster personalization:
  - **Smaller Learning Environments.** Some schools have been divided into small schools, houses, or small learning communities (SLCs) in an effort to reduce the student-adult ratio and foster strong relationships. Fenway High, uses a “house” system and each teacher has no more than 75 students for whom they are responsible. Each house has a student support coordinator who serves as a guidance counselor and social worker.
  - **More Staff/Peer Attention.** At Plymouth South, advisors work with at-risk students to assist them in developing their own coursework to ensure that it is aligned to their interests and academic goals. The faculty at Plymouth South High has also trained selected seniors to mentor incoming freshman students. Fitchburg High has an advisory program in which each staff mentor is assigned to 15 students. According to Fitchburg High Principal Richard Masciarelli, the goal is to, “convince students that we care for them.” Similarly, Taconic High in Pittsfield created the “Connections” program in which teachers voluntarily check in with at-risk students once a week to see how they are doing, where they are struggling and to match them with the appropriate types of support.
  
- **Academic Supports.** Nine of 11 schools provide options targeted to helping at-risk students improve academic performance and re-engage in school. Academic support fell into the following categories: extra help and curriculum adjustments; credit recovery; and more time for academics.
  - **Extra Help and Curriculum Adjustments.** Three schools offer extra help opportunities during the school day and have developed extra courses in core subject areas such as English and math for students who need extra help. At Somerset High, peer tutoring is available to students during the school day. As a district, Plymouth has made adjustments to seventh and eighth grade curriculum in reading and math in order to ensure that students are better prepared in high school. An “English Essentials” course for students who failed English is offered in Pittsfield—and is taught by an especially effective English teacher.
  - **Credit Recovery.** Most schools offered a credit recovery program, enabling students who are falling behind to catch up. These programs vary in length and are offered at different times throughout the year (during the school year, in the evenings, over the summer). Fitchburg High offers a credit recovery program on Saturdays that is funded by an academic support grant (awarded by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education) with Mt. Wachusett Community College. This program allows students who fail because of excessive absences to earn back credits through classes in core subject areas. The number of student absences dictates how many extra Saturday hours they need to complete. Lowell High’s “Self-Pace” program allows students who enroll in the district mid-year to finish out the semester and earn partial credit. Students can reduce the number of courses they take but take longer blocks of subjects in order to catch up. This program provides a smaller group setting, offered in the school building, in which students can earn back up to ten credits per semester as opposed to 17.5 credits in traditional courses.
  - **More Time for Academics.** Most schools and districts interviewed reported offering academic programs after school and in the evenings to provide students with additional support. Most of these programs are held at the high schools or at another building within the district. In some cases, students must travel outside of the district to enroll in an evening program. In general, these programs are offered as extended day, after-school extra help and/or during the summer. Some programs are specifically geared toward at-risk students while others are open to all students.
 

Fitchburg and Somerset provide extended day programs for at-risk students. Five high schools mentioned providing after-school homework clubs or centers to provide struggling students with more targeted academic support. Brighton High School created “E-Block,” an additional after-school period that is mandatory for struggling students and through which they receive MCAS tutoring and opportunities for credit recovery. (Please see Appendix A for more information.)
  
- **Wrap-Around Services.** All schools provide programs that support students’ non-academic needs. Most schools and districts interviewed utilized counselors and wrap-around services to provide social-emotional and psychological support. Somerset High has developed a school-based program for students experiencing emotional, behavioral

or academic issues. This program offers smaller class sizes and students join based on a recommendation from guidance counselors or referrals from teachers. The “Bridge” program in Lowell is a long-term therapeutic program for seventh and eighth graders, especially those involved in gangs. Lowell has also developed a 45-90 day program specifically designed to get struggling students back on track behaviorally and emotionally so they can return to school. The program involves the family and counselors as well as educators.

- **Advisory Programs for Special Populations.** Five high schools customized advisory programs to meet the diverse needs of individual student sub-groups—specifically for special education students, Latinos, and African-American males. For example, teachers in the special education department at Excel High in Boston serve as advisors after school to students with special needs—each teacher is assigned ten students with whom s/he continues as an advisor for all four years. Lowell has developed the Latino Connections Program, which is targeted to the needs of Latino-American students who are experiencing barriers to remaining in school until graduation and provides social-emotional support for them. Fenway High School in Boston launched an after-school program called, Men of MORE (Men Organized, Responsible and Educated) that recruits male students of color as freshmen and works with them through their senior year. The Men of MORE program includes retreats, dinners, college visits and meetings with professional men.
- **Support for the Transition to Ninth Grade.** Research has shown that the transition to high school is a tenuous time for many students for it is during this time that many choose to leave high school.<sup>13</sup> Several districts developed interventions specifically designed to stem the rate of students dropping out in ninth grade. Four schools have developed some variation of Freshman Academies that specifically focus on incoming ninth graders. Freshman Academies are designed to provide academic support, counseling, and guidance to ninth graders. In Lowell, the Freshman Academy “doubled all services for freshmen.” This meant using a case management approach and providing twice as many guidance counselors and administrators for the incoming ninth grade class. In Fitchburg, between the eighth and ninth grades, students are referred by teachers to a summer program if they have weak academic performance. School leaders report that students more easily transition from eighth to ninth grades after participating in this program. The Pittsfield Public Schools designed a program for students who failed two or more courses in middle school. In addition to providing academic support to these students, the program also teaches social skills.

## Mentoring in Taunton

Taunton High uses mentoring to build stronger student-student relationships. School leaders created a mentor program between at-risk ninth graders and fourth graders. The ninth graders served as one-on-one math tutors for 4th graders for two hours after school. Of the 38 students who participated in the program, only one dropped out and attendance rates improved because students “knew their fourth graders were waiting for them.” According to Taunton Superintendent Stellar, “the bonus was that the fourth graders’ math achievement improved.”

## “Invite Your Staff to Lunch Day” at Worcester South

Worcester South has launched this program in the 2008-2009 school year to foster personalization. The school provides students with an invitation that they are to give to one staff member. The staff person and student then meet for lunch in the school cafeteria. The program has helped students make connections with staff through informal conversations over lunch.

<sup>13</sup> Abrams, L. & Haney, W. (2004). “Accountability and the Grade 9 to 10 Transition: The Impact on Attrition and Retention Rates.” In *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis*. Denver, CO: National Center for School Engagement; Neild, R.C. & Balfanz, R. (2006). *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia’s Dropout Crisis, 2000–2005*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Youth Transitions Collaborative; Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. (2005). *The on-track indicator as a predictor of high school graduation*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

## Connecting School to College and Career

Eight schools developed programs to strengthen the connection between high school and college and careers. According to Taconic High Principal, Douglas McNally, students are more likely to dropout if “they don’t make a connection between future life and what they’re doing in school.”

- **Career Connections.** Three schools mentioned establishing internship programs to connect students with work experience. Taconic High created a “Career Exploratory” vocational class for ninth graders in which over 20 students participate each year. Taconic High also developed a Mentoring Program connected with its Career Pathways program which begins in students’ junior year. Juniors are paired up with off-campus mentors who provide guidance and advice in the student’s specific career pathway. (Please see Appendix A for more information.) At Tantasqua High, a full-time school-to-career coordinator works with students to modify their schedules to connect more closely with their career goals and talks with students about educational and career options. She also links them to career counseling services. In addition, Tantasqua High developed a credit-bearing internship program in which about 80 students each semester participate in an internship either at school or off-site. At Fitchburg High School, 78 seniors went on full-time internships for the Spring 2008 semester. In order to participate, students must convince a committee that the internship has a direct relationship to their potential college major or career choice. As part of Somerset’s School-to-Work Program, students receive school credit for after-school employment, which has been vetted by teachers who go on site to meet with employers. Fenway High has a two-year program that begins in students’ junior year with the development of a business plan for either a nonprofit organization or business. Students work in teams to develop their ideas, conduct research, create the plan and develop marketing materials. At the end of the semester, students present their proposals to a panel of judges representing community agencies, businesses, parents, and faculty. In students’ senior year the course consists of a business and life skills curriculum as well as exposure to careers through research, job shadows, mentoring, and a career fair which is held at the school. The senior year ends with a six-week, full-time unpaid internship in a field of the students’ choice. Successful completion of the internship is required for graduation.
- **Connections to College.** Two schools cite dual enrollment programs as an effective part of their dropout prevention strategy and two other schools expose their students to college through college tours and programs that support students as they prepare for college applications. Fitchburg High School is partnering with Mt. Wachusett Community College on the “Gateway to College” program which gives students who have dropped out of school the opportunity to simultaneously earn a high school diploma and college credits. Taconic High in Pittsfield has established dual enrollment with Berkshire Community College. Through this program students who have “aged out of high school emotionally” can take college courses for credit if they remain enrolled or re-enroll in high school. Taconic High School, through a partnership with Berkshire Community College, also administers the Accuplacer (a college placement exam used by Massachusetts state colleges and universities) to all juniors so that students can gauge whether or not they are ready for college coursework while they still have two years of high school for additional preparation. At Worcester South, students can participate in the “Connects to College” program, a partnership with Worcester State and Clark University that takes students on college tours throughout the state in the hopes of giving them motivation to do well in high school and continue on to college. In addition, at

### Celebrating Success: Worcester South’s Renaissance Program

As a way of formally recognizing students who are working hard and making progress Worcester South gives special awards to students who brought a grade up by one whole letter grade. The Renaissance Program is a national educational enrichment program developed by Jostens. (For more information, visit: <http://www.jostens.com/edserv/renaissance/>.) According to Principal Binienda, “It’s recognition for kids who are trying to make it up the ladder. They get an ‘On Your Way’ certificate.” The awards are presented at quarterly assemblies where students are called up on stage. Principal Binienda explains, “The certificates mean a lot to students. We don’t find them on the floor—students don’t throw them away.” The program shows students that they should be proud of what they’ve accomplished.



the beginning of all classes at Worcester South students must develop goals and then write a statement answering the question, "How will these goals help me get ready for college?" This exercise begins with a dialogue between the teacher and students highlighting students' ownership of their learning. The goal is to help students understand that they are responsible for their own learning and to see the connection between what they do in high school and their future opportunities for success in higher education.

## Alternatives to Traditional High School

For some students, a traditional high school simply does not work. In order to provide pathways to high school diplomas for these students, seven schools developed alternative high school models. Lowell High developed the Alternative Diploma Program which provides course recovery along with a job experience component. In addition to its middle school "Bridge" program (referenced in the Wrap-Around Services section of this report), Lowell also created an Alternative School at Lowell High School that provides smaller learning environments and enables students to graduate with a Lowell High diploma. Worcester offers a night program for all students in the district that enables them to earn a regular diploma. Through a partnership with its Regional Employment Board, Pittsfield established the Re-Connect Center, a program for students on the verge of dropping out or who have recently dropped out. This Center offers an opportunity for students to explore options related to career, skills training, and returning to school. (Please see Appendix A for more information.) Plymouth South developed an Alternative High School that is housed within the school. Students in this program are with one teacher all day and stay until 7:00 PM. According to Plymouth South Principal Connors, "they become each other's family." Similarly, Somerset established a Community Evening School housed at the high school. When a Somerset student expresses an interest in dropping out, they are provided with information about the Community Evening School, which is run by a former guidance counselor.

## Collaborations and Partnerships

Nine schools described launching collaborative initiatives among their faculties as well as developing external partnerships focused on at-risk students.

- **Collaboration within Schools.** Five schools mentioned establishing team approaches or faculty-wide approaches to reducing the dropout rate. At Fenway High, groups of teachers and administrators have scheduled time to meet with one another to talk about individual student's issues and strategize about how to address them. According to Fenway Headmaster Peggy Kemp, "The responsibility can't be placed on one individual." Tantasqua High has a weekly leadership team meeting that includes the principal, assistant principal, special education director, school-to-career counselor, and the head of guidance to discuss the "students on radar" (SOR) report, which lists students who have been identified by staff because they are struggling with attendance, domestic issues and/or academics.
- **External Partnerships.** Six schools have established partnerships with other agencies or organizations in their communities. In Pittsfield, the district has reached out to several community partners. Superintendent Jake Eberwein explained, "we hit a wall when we realized [addressing] the dropout issue was bigger than the school. We needed to get the community involved." Pittsfield has established a number of external partnerships with the Workforce Investment Board, Sheriff's office, Juvenile Court, Chamber of Commerce, and the United Way, among others. In partnership with the Berkshire County Sheriff Department, the Pittsfield Public Schools established the Juvenile Resource Center, which provides a range of programs for dropouts and students at-risk of dropping out. (Please see Appendix A for more information.) At Tantasqua High, YOU, Inc., a full-service social service agency, pro-

### "Community Forum" on Dropouts in Pittsfield

In February 2008, the Pittsfield Public Schools worked in collaboration with business, law enforcement, juvenile justice agencies and local colleges to host a forum focused on each agency and organization's role in overcoming the problem of students dropping out. At the forum, attendees developed six study teams that now meet monthly and focus on: identifying students at-risk; early intervention; mentoring; alternative pathways; graduation requirements; and community alignment of efforts focused on the dropout problem.

vides a variety of programs for at-risk students as well as GED programs. At Brighton High School, “Leaders of Tomorrow,” a non-profit organization committed to the social and emotional development of children, adolescents and young adults, provides mental health services as well as dropout prevention programs. At Fenway High, teachers in training through the Boston Teacher Residency Program and Tufts Urban Teacher Training Collaborative provide additional capacity and enable the school to have two adults in every classroom the majority of the time. In Worcester, staff from Upward Bound provide instruction, tutoring and counseling to low-income and first generation students who are college-bound. Three schools also participate in the Gear Up Program, which is designed to increase the number of low-income students that enter and succeed in higher education. The program offers academic and social support to students in grades seven, eight and nine and will continue the support through graduation, for a total of six years of support.

## Considerations Based on Findings

- **The Importance of Leadership.** This policy brief highlights the high priority that all of the schools and their leaders place on addressing the needs of struggling learners and students at-risk for dropping out. Much of this emphasis has been initiated and sustained by committed school leaders who focus on and value the students who are at-risk for dropping out. School leaders have also transmitted the need to focus on these students to their entire faculty. Brighton High’s Headmaster Romer explained that “reducing the number of dropouts is a transparent priority for the whole school.” Some high schools shared a school wide mantra or buzz phrase that expressed their commitment to supporting these students. Tantasqua High’s mantra is, “Every student deserves success.”
- **No Silver Bullets.** All of the schools included in this study used multiple strategies to reduce their dropout rates. Most school and district leaders commented that this is complex work and described the various reasons that students drop out of school: family commitments, drugs, gangs, boredom, and pregnancy, among others. As a result, if schools want to improve the persistence rates of these students, they must address this diverse set of challenges with a correspondingly diverse set of interventions and supports. As evident from the schools studied here, dropouts have a wide range of needs, so the schools’ and districts’ responses must be varied and easily customized.
- **Follow-up with Dropouts.** It is also important to note what most schools are *not* doing to address the number of students who leave school prior to graduation. Most of the schools selected for this study are not contacting students who have dropped out. While five schools conduct mandatory exit interviews with all dropouts, most school leaders admitted that they do not make efforts to reach out to students who have left—either to find out why they dropped out, or to encourage them to return to some course of study that would lead to a diploma. Many schools cited a lack of capacity and resources to do this work.
- **Persistent Effort Over Time.** While the schools that participated in this study are at various stages in their efforts to address the dropout rate, many have been making dropouts a priority for several years. These schools have continued to refine their initiatives based on students’ success, or lack thereof. It is important to note that for these schools, there have been no quick fixes and that the success of these schools has been dependent upon a sustained focus on the needs of these learners and a steadfast commitment of resources over time.
- **More than Academics.** Finally, it is worth emphasizing that most of the schools in this study do not focus exclusively on academic support and MCAS preparation in reducing dropouts. Some schools mentioned that more than 50 percent of their dropouts pass MCAS and that a narrow focus on MCAS performance would therefore not be sufficient to reduce their dropout rates. At Taconic High in Pittsfield, 80-90 percent of the students who drop out have already passed MCAS. According to Taconic High Principal McNally, it was “a real shocker how few students leave for [strictly] academic reasons.” All of the selected schools combined academic support with initiatives to foster students’ increased engagement in school—through efforts to personalize learning and the school environment, increase the focus on the relevance of school to students’ future, and to support students’ social and emotional needs.

# The Role of the District in Reducing Dropouts

Traditionally, high schools have borne the brunt of the responsibility for preventing students from dropping out. As more data about dropouts becomes available, a clear role has emerged for districts. The following are some of the most commonly referenced supports provided by districts:

- **Provide good, high-quality, easy to use data.** Having data provided from the central office can save school leaders time as well as help them to develop programs that respond to the needs of students at-risk for dropping out. Districts can assist high school leaders by providing access to student data from junior high and middle school that can be used in identifying at-risk students. The Plymouth Public Schools produces a district testing report that includes recommendations for action steps and targeted goals for schools based on their students' performance on individual questions. School leaders are encouraged to use these reports to engage in conversation with faculty about what is working and what is not working for all learners—and then to make instructional changes based on these data.
- **Provide data collection tools for schools.** The district office sometimes has more capacity than individual schools to develop protocols and tools for collecting data. This can be an invaluable resource as schools attempt to identify students at-risk for dropping out and to monitor their progress throughout the school year.
- **Establish alternative programs for at-risk students.** Several of the districts included in this study have established alternative programs to address the needs of students for whom the traditional school structure and schedule is not working.
- **Allow autonomy for schools to try new programs.** Districts can support the work of schools by providing them with the flexibility and autonomy to try new programs that target their students' unique needs. Headmaster Kemp from Fenway High (a pilot school<sup>14</sup>) noted that Boston's central office supported her school's work by "allowing us to have autonomy to develop our own curriculum and to use funds as we see fit."
- **Cultivate a consistent focus on at-risk students across schools.** While autonomy can be important, Boston Academic Superintendent for High Schools, Irvin Scott, explains that the district has a role to play in establishing a "thread of consistency" from school to school throughout the district. Without this, it is possible to have "pockets of excellence"—schools that are doing well with at-risk students while other schools in the district falter. The district can develop system-wide initiatives that target at-risk students and hold all schools accountable for supporting these students. According to Academic Superintendent Scott, "we need to help people see that [completing high school] is a life or death issue for kids."
- **Reach out to disconnected youth.** There is a clear role for the district in providing the capacity (in the form of a staff person or people) to reach out to and connect with students who have dropped out or become truant. It is through conversations with these students that new initiatives and alternative pathways to graduation can be developed and tailored to students' needs.
- **Help establish partnerships with external resources.** Districts are sometimes better positioned than schools to connect with businesses, other state and city agencies, and community organizations that can provide additional resources for at-risk students. Headmaster Romer of Brighton High noted that the Boston Public Schools had connected him to the Boston Plan for Excellence (BPE), which precipitated Brighton High's piloting a BPE-developed tool for identifying early indicators of rising ninth grade at-risk students.
- **Share best practices from school to school within the district.** This suggestion is most applicable to districts with multiple high schools, but is also relevant for small districts, which might consider sharing strategies among middle schools, junior high and high schools.

14 Pilot schools are Boston Public Schools that have autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum/assessment, and the school calendar.

## Conclusion

The schools and districts that participated in this study provide promising examples of policies and initiatives that appear to be having a positive impact on the number of students dropping out. While this is most assuredly complex and labor-intensive work, these schools and districts demonstrate that it can be done—and in order to ensure that all students have access to opportunities for future success in life, it must be done. It is the Rennie Center's hope that the schools and districts cited in this report will serve as models and resources to one another and to other schools and districts that are just beginning to formulate systemic plans for addressing the needs of struggling students at risk of dropping out.

If every child is to graduate from high school prepared for what lies ahead, school, district, state and federal policies must leverage and support strategies and interventions that are proving effective in reducing the numbers of students dropping out. Supporting programs that address the needs of dropouts can seem especially daunting in times of constrained fiscal resources. Yet it is clear that the long-term costs of not addressing the dropout crisis are considerably higher than the costs required to ensure that all students are prepared to be successful citizens of the Commonwealth.

# Appendix A: Profiles from Selected Schools

## PROFILE 1:

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### Taconic High School and the Pittsfield Public Schools

About 15 years ago, the Pittsfield Public Schools began addressing the problem of students dropping out and over time has developed a comprehensive array of strategies for supporting students at-risk of dropping out. The district and the school have worked collaboratively to develop these strategies. According to Taconic High Principal McNally, "It's hard to differentiate the strategies that were developed at the district level and those developed at the school level. Most policies are developed at the district level and involve a lot of building-level input."

#### *Data Analysis*

In Pittsfield, school leaders begin by looking at student data. At Taconic High, faculty look at: middle school core academic failures, attendance patterns in middle school, fourth grade reading scores (seeking to identify those students two or more years behind grade level in reading), and students with extensive discipline referrals in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. In the spring before students' ninth grade year, faculty review students' performance and determine the types of support/remediation needed at the high school.

#### *Targeted Interventions*

Taconic staff review students' performance and determine the supports and/or remediation the student might need. For example, a student who is two or more years below grade level in math is placed in a remedial class, which means he/she receives a double period of math with remediation built in. If the student is "really far behind," Taconic faculty put the student on a five-year graduation plan, with parent approval. In the five-year plan, students spend two years "attacking core academic skills" (reading, ELA and math) and are provided with an academic intervention period that consists of a small group of students per teacher and targeted instruction and support. Ninth graders on the five-year plan have a "Career Exploratory" vocational class. About 20 students per year opt into the five-year plan. Some students expedite out of the program and graduate in four years. Students in the five-year plan have a higher graduation rate than the district average—80% vs. 70% at the district.

#### *Connecting to College and Careers*

In order to address the needs of over-age students at-risk of dropping out, Pittsfield established a dual enrollment program in partnership with Berkshire Community College (BCC). This allows students still enrolled at Taconic to take credit-bearing college courses. BCC allows every Pittsfield senior to take one free course per semester.

Pittsfield school leaders credit the Career Pathway Model at Taconic High for much of their success in reducing the dropout rate. The decision to start the Career Pathway program was data-driven. School leaders realized that students "don't have dreams of their future. They don't make connections between future life and what they're doing in school. They see school as a purgatory." In order to more tightly connect school and students' future, school leaders added several career academies in the areas of Finance, IT, Hospitality, Science/Engineering, Human Services and Performing Arts/Fine Arts. Students who choose to participate in academies select two of their seven courses in these fields. This program helps them "develop their dreams" while developing caring relationships with adults. There has not been a dropout from the academies in the seven years since the program was first implemented.

#### *Establishing Partnerships*

Pittsfield has been working with community-based organizations and state agencies to develop a comprehensive, systemic approach to reducing the dropout rate. In 2002, the Pittsfield Public Schools, in collaboration with the Berkshire County Sheriff's Office launched the Juvenile Resource Center (JRC). Funded by a federal Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grant, the JRC operates several programs that target dropouts and students at-risk of dropping out:

- **The School Suspension Program.** This program requires students in grades 6-12 who receive school suspensions of three days or more to report to the JRC. Students work with an outreach worker and tutors to complete work assignments. The goal is for the suspended students to return to the classroom with as little disruption to their academic progress as possible.
- **The After-School Program.** This program provides a life skills and occupational training program designed to break the cycle of juvenile crime by re-directing the energies of participants into meaningful activity. The program provides education skills assessment and skill building, vocational opportunities, substance abuse treatment, psycho-educational groups, life-skills planning and aftercare. The program also includes on-site drug and alcohol testing, electronic monitoring and individual counseling.
- **The Truancy Prevention Program (TIP).** This program employs a uniformed officer and a case worker who provide direct intervention with truant students. Working with the schools (high school attendance coordinators and middle school attendance paraprofessionals) the TIPs team conducts home visits. In some cases, the team arranges to provide transportation to school; other cases require casework and intervention with the parents, extreme cases involve court involvement. The TIPs team has been “instrumental” in increasing attendance through its partnership with the PPS.
- **Long-Term Tutoring.** Students with significant school violations (drugs, weapons, and/or violence) are referred to the JRC for long-term tutoring in a safe environment. Housed in a former jail, the JRC reduces the risk of drugs, weapons and violence by requiring students to be “buzzed” into the building. They are then greeted by sheriff’s officers, travel through a metal detector, and their belongings are searched for contraband. Students in long-term tutoring are evaluated by a school psychologist throughout their placement at the JRC with the ultimate goal of deeming them safe to return to school. Through this program, students can maintain their academic progress without compromising the safety of their peers.
- **Dropout Prevention Program.** Launched in 2006, this program takes juniors and seniors who, in the last half of their high school careers, have shown indications that they are likely to drop out of school. Students are referred to the program by their high school guidance counselors and building principals. Once referred, students are assigned to a case worker who maps out a plan of academic studies. For one half of the day, students attend the JRC and combine direct instruction with the Plato learning system. With the remainder of their day, students work with a work coordinator to obtain employment in the community under a Massachusetts work-based learning plan. If work is not available, students work on service projects in which they are “sponsored” by an adult who coordinates service work within the community. All students receive instruction in employment readiness. To date, the dropout prevention program has served over 50 students who may have otherwise dropped out of school.

In addition to the JRC, the district recently partnered with the Regional Employment Board to create a Re-Connect Center designed for students who are still in high school or have recently dropped out. The Center provides staff advisors that are available to help youth and young adults ages 16 to 24 plan their next steps toward a career pathway, including strategies for further education, job searching, training and life skills.

## Brighton High School and the Boston Public Schools

In 2007, Brighton High School began piloting the Composite Learning Index (CLI), which was developed by the Boston Plan for Excellence and incorporates 15 indicators of risk: six social/behavioral and nine academic. Each indicator is assigned a weight: the greater the correlation to risk, the higher the weight. Each student's weighted scores are then used to create a single CLI score and to place him/her on a continuum of risk as he/she enters the ninth grade, from "Off Track" to "On Track."

In October 2008, the Boston Public Schools launched its "Early Warning Indicators" tool (which is based on the CLI) in every high school in the district. According to Academic Superintendent for High Schools Irvin Scott, "students don't drop out, they fade out." They gradually stop coming and/or stop engaging with school. Ideally, having the data provided by the Early Warning Indicators will "allow us to catch them while they're fading" and prevent them from dropping out. Scott also acknowledged the need for the district to upgrade its Student Information Management System to one where "data is live and accessible" to those who can intervene.

According to the most recent CLI data, 70% of BHS' students are at "high risk" for dropping out. Therefore, this year, Brighton decided to use the CLI to target the 40 incoming ninth graders that were extremely high risk for focused intervention.

These students were then assigned to the EnVision program during the school's new "E-Block" class period. The normal class schedule at Brighton High has blocks from A-D. The school created "E-Block" as an extra block at the end of the school day and added it to the schedules of the students that needed extra support or academic intervention. For these students, E-Block is mandatory and occurs every Monday, Tuesday and Thursday from 2:10–3:30. The class includes ELA and math instruction as well as goal setting and post-secondary planning activities. The class is co-taught by school teachers and staff, and also includes volunteers and tutors from local colleges and universities.

E-Block at Brighton High provides course offerings that have helped to decrease the dropout rate, including the following:

- **Algebra I.** This is a credit recovery and MCAS preparation program for selected second year students who did not pass Algebra I in the ninth grade.
- **MCAS ELA and ESL Preparation.** An MCAS preparation program for selected tenth graders in danger of not passing or reaching proficiency on the ELA MCAS exam.
- **ELA Credit Recovery.** A credit recovery course for 12th grade students who need an additional ELA course to graduate on-time.
- **SLC Tutoring/Homework Help.** Each of the school's three small learning communities offer a tutoring center during E-Block that is optional for all students.

Each year, the BHS faculty also use midyear assessment data to identify students at-risk of not passing the MCAS exam and assign these students to the MCAS E-Block course. Each of the school's three SLC's has a group of 10-20 students identified for this intervention. SLC faculty and administrators then reach out to build relationships with these students and ensure their attendance at E-Block. As a result of these efforts, BHS has seen a 23% increase in the number of students receiving proficient scores on the ELA MCAS.

## Appendix B: List of Interviewees

**Boston Public Schools**—Academic Superintendent for High Schools, Irvin Scott

- Brighton High School, Headmaster Toby Romer
- Excel High School, Headmaster Ligia Noriega
- Fenway High School, Headmaster Peggy Kemp

**Worcester Public Schools**

- Worcester South High School, Acting Principal Maureen Binienda

**Lowell Public Schools**—Superintendent Chris Scott and Assistant Superintendent Ann Murray

- Lowell High School, Student Support Services Coordinator Kerry Lynch

**Pittsfield Public Schools**—Superintendent Howard “Jake” Eberwein

- Taconic High School, Principal Douglas McNally

**Plymouth Public Schools**—Superintendent Gary Maestas

- Plymouth South High School, Principal Patricia Connors

**Fitchburg Public Schools**—Superintendent Andre Ravenelle

- Fitchburg High School, Principal Richard Masciarelli

**Somerset Public Schools**—Superintendent Richard Mederios

- Somerset High School, Principal Robert Pineault

**Tantasqua Regional School District**—Superintendent Daniel Durgin

- Tantasqua Regional Senior High School, Principal Steven Bliss

**Taunton Public Schools**—Superintendent Arthur Stellar

- Taunton High School, Assistant Headmaster Brenda Moynihan



# Appendix C: Interview Questions

## *For Superintendents and other District-Level Staff*

1. Do you have a district-based mechanism for identifying potential dropouts? If so, please describe it.
2. Does your district have policies and practices designed to reduce the number of dropouts? Are these described in the District Improvement Plan?
3. Is there a person at the district-level who has major responsibility for coordinating dropout prevention programs and services? If so, please describe the person's role and responsibilities.
4. Does the district dedicate specific resources to drop out prevention?
5. Does the district work with community organizations or agencies on dropout issues? If so, please describe.
6. When did you implement your dropout prevention strategies?
  - a. What led to the development of these strategies?
  - b. Has the district's approach changed over time? If so, how and why?
7. Is the district's approach to reducing the number of dropouts effective?
  - a. What specific policies or practices are most effective?
  - b. How do you measure success and/or progress?
  - c. What goal do you hope to meet?
8. Does the district gather data on why students drop out of school? If so, what type of data is collected and how?
9. Based on your experience and any data you have collected, why do students in your district drop out?
10. Aside from your current dropout prevention strategies, what other strategies do you think might be effective in reducing the number of dropouts? What barriers are there to implementing these strategies?
11. Does the district contact students who have dropped out?
  - a. If so, when do you make initial contact and how often do you follow-up?
  - b. Has this process resulted in any students re-enrolling in high school or pursuing alternative pathways to graduation?
12. What recommendations would you make to other superintendents who are seeking to reduce the number of dropouts in their district?

## *For Principals and School-Level Staff*

1. Are there dropout prevention and recovery strategies that you are implementing in your school that were initiated by the district?
2. Does your school have a mechanism for identifying potential dropouts? If so, please describe it. Do you target students in certain grades?
3. What strategies does your school implement to reduce the number of dropouts?
  - a. When were these strategies first implemented?
  - b. Has the school's approach changed over time? If so, how and why?
4. How does the district support your dropout prevention strategy? Which of these supports are most helpful? Please explain why.
5. Is there a person at your school who has major responsibility for working with students who have been identified as "at risk" for dropping out of school?
6. Are there community-based organizations that work with the school on dropout issues? (Such as YMCAs, faith-based organizations.)
7. When did you begin to implement strategies to reduce the dropout rate?
  - a. What led to development of these strategies?
  - b. Has the school's approach changed over time? How and why?
8. In your opinion, is the school's approach to reducing the number of dropouts effective?
  - a. What specific policies or practices are most effective?
  - b. How do you measure success and/or progress?
  - c. What goal do you hope to meet?

9. Based on your experience and any data you have collected, why do students in your school drop out?
10. Aside from your current dropout prevention strategies, what other strategies do you think might be effective in reducing the number of dropouts in your school? What barriers are there to implementing these strategies?
11. Does your school contact students who have dropped out?
  - a. If so, when do you make initial contact and how often do you follow-up?
  - b. Has this process resulted in any students re-enrolling in high school or pursuing alternative pathways to graduation?



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In an effort to promote public discourse on educational improvement and to inform policy discussions, the Rennie Center periodically publishes policy briefs, which are broadly disseminated to policymakers and stakeholders in the public, private, nonprofit and media sectors. Policy briefs contain independent research on issues of critical importance to the improvement of public education. Briefs are designed to present policymakers and opinion leaders with just-in-time information to help guide and inform their decisions on key educational issues.

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The Rennie Center's mission is to develop a public agenda that informs and promotes significant improvement of public education in Massachusetts. Our work is motivated by a vision of an education system that creates the opportunity to educate every child to be successful in life, citizenship, employment and life-long learning. Applying nonpartisan, independent research, journalism and civic engagement, the Rennie Center is creating a civil space to foster thoughtful public discourse to inform and shape effective policy. For more information, please visit: [www.renniecenter.org](http://www.renniecenter.org).

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