Op-Ed

By Dr. Sandy Addis, Executive Director, National Dropout Prevention Center/Network

**Johnny Is Absent Today**

Johnny is absent from school today—again. He was absent yesterday and may be tomorrow as well. Johnny is absent because he is experiencing the slow but steady process of disengagement that can and often does contribute to dropping out of high school.

Unfortunately, Johnny’s not alone in his absences—or his disengagement from school. Juan, Susie, Omar, Pierre and many other students across the nation share his story. The unfortunate fact is that, once begun and without intervention, a student’s disengagement all too often culminates in that student dropping out of school. And while there other equally important indicators, excessive school absence is a primary indicator of disengagement.

The good news is that, addressed early and systemically, Johnny’s outcome—and the outcomes of other students like him—to stay in school or not can be impacted. There’s more good news. When Johnny graduates from high school, he can expect to earn on average $8,000 more per year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2015a), contributing not only to Johnny’s economic stability, but also our nation’s. Johnny can also expect a longer lifespan (up to 9 years; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2015a), but the good news does not stop there. Johnny, like all other high school graduates, can expect an overall better quality of life, making his graduation have lifelong benefits.

There are no tricks of the trade, so to speak, for ensuring Johnny will stay in school. However, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N), working with practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and researchers, has developed *15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention* that address not only the factors that affect Johnny’s graduating from high school , but also those that impact the dropout crisis in our nation as a whole.

October marks the 30th anniversary of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, an organization whose website serves as the world’s most accessed resource for information on issues related to dropout prevention, intervention, and reentry/recovery and a network for those dedicated to preventing school dropout and promoting graduation from high school. Its free resources range from a model programs database to professional development webcasts to research reports from leading authorities in the field of dropout prevention. Other resources, such as data-based, on-site assessments of existing dropout prevention practices for schools, school clusters, and districts, peer-reviewed publications and journals, networking events, workshops and customized research services, are also available. Approximately half a million people per year access NDPC/N resources.

Why, then, with so many resources being utilized by so many people, does Johnny still become one of the thousands of students who drop out of school every year? How can we reach Johnny before he drops out of school?

First, it is important to note that progress is being made. Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey, the status dropout rate, defined as the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential) decreased from 12 percent in 1990 to 7 percent in 2013, the latest year statistics are available. However, like any other complex issue rooted in ever-changing causes, continuing to positively impact school dropout, at either the individual level or the national level, does not lend itself to one simple solution and more progress is needed.

The [*Fifteen Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention*](http://dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/) developed by the National Dropout Prevention Center provide an overall research-based framework that when applied systemically by practitioners, schools, or districts according to the unique needs of each becomes an effective tool for reducing the dropout rate. As a framework, the strategies encourage flexibility and applicability beyond formulas and prescriptive methodology. They offer insights based on 30 years of research and best practices. When the strategies are utilized together, they increase in effectiveness since the strategies themselves model a systemic approach to addressing school dropout. Positive outcomes and results are most likely when school districts or other agencies develop program improvement plans that encompass most or all of the strategies.

The *15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention* have been successful at all school levels from PK-12 and in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Grouped into four general categories related to foundational strategies, early interventions, basic core strategies, and managing and improving instruction, each category is divided into sub-categories that provide additional related strategies. For example, the strategic category of managing and improving instruction also offers specific related strategies that emphasize the need to provide ongoing professional learning opportunities, support, and feedback for adults who work with youth at risk of dropping out, all important for keeping practitioners engaged so that they, in turn, keep students engaged.

Promoting active learning, involving students in meaningful ways as partners in their own learning, and utilizing educational technology to effectively support both teaching and learning become further strategies for encouraging student engagement. Individualized instruction, including encompassing differentiation and individualization, is essential for all youth, but for youth at risk, instruction designed to prepare them for careers and that is also focused on school’s relevancy to their future careers and personal goals becomes one tool of many to use to help prevent at-risk students from dropping out.

Taken as a whole, the *15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention* provide direction for better meeting the needs of at-risk students. The strategies lead to success in keeping at-risk students engaged in school—from those strategies that address the effectiveness of school and community relationships to those that stress the impact of early interventions to those that capitalize on mentoring, tutoring, service-learning, alternative learning environments and after-school and out-of-school activities. They all help meet the needs of youth in at-risk situations—students just like Johnny.

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network’s goal is a zero dropout rate, and we will continue to address the challenge of increasing the high school on-time graduation rate. Just as there are no tricks of the trade to address school dropout, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Students report a variety of reasons for dropping out of school; therefore, the solutions are multidimensional as well. As a nation, our obligation—our moral imperative—is to employ every strategy available to ensure Johnny, Juan, Susie, Omar, and every other student earns a high school diploma.

###

Dr. Sandy Addis is the Executive Director of the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC), College of Education, Clemson University in Clemson, SC. He can be reached at (864) 656-2599. Further information on the NDPC and the *15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention* is available at [www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org), the leading resource on dropout prevention.

**About the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N)**

The National Dropout Prevention Center will mark its 30 year anniversary in October 2016. Established in 1986 with a mission to reduce dropout rates, the NDPC/N shares solutions for student success and dropout prevention through its clearinghouse function, active research and evaluation projects, publications, and a variety of professional development activities and conferences. The organization’s website—[www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org/)—is the nation’s leading resource in providing effective, research-based solutions to engaging students and reducing dropout. The NDPC/N is housed in the College of Education at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina.

.