**The Rural Principal’s Guide to Dropout Prevention**

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# About the Authors

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**Introduction**

Reim (2014) declared that “one of the most crucial factors that determine a child’s ability to move up the economic ladder is education,” but thousands of students continue to drop out of school each year. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2014) reported the 2013–2014 national graduation rate, representing a recently implemented uniform method of calculation, was 82%. While this indicated an improvement in high school completion over recent years, 18% of the class of 2014 did not complete high school and left school unprepared for college or career. In 2007, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network published a monograph entitled *The Principal’s Role in Dropout Prevention: Seven Key Principles* by Steven W. and Rebecca Edwards, which addressed the role of high school principals in combating the dropout problem. Steven Edwards served as a principal of an urban school in Hartford, Connecticut, and during his tenure reduced the dropout rate from 28% to less than 2% (Edwards & Edwards, 2007). His work in Hartford led to the identification of seven principles fundamental to the success of programs targeting dropout rate reduction.

These principles have significance in a variety of educational settings including rural educational initiatives; however, they come with some individual challenges. While no single definition exists to define rural America and rural schools, Harmon and Weeks (n.d.) indicate they tend to have three common characteristics—low population density; declining natural resource-based industries; and increasing low-skill, low-wage rural worker competition. In 1998 approximately 17 million public school students attended rural or small town schools (Harmon & Weeks, n.d.). The challenges of addressing the varied and extensive needs of the at-risk student are compounded by the circumstances of a rural environment. It is important that the rural principal establish a climate that expects graduation. The seven principles, while valuable and essential to successful dropout prevention initiatives, are not equal in their impact relative to the school/system setting or in the required level of administrative attention necessary for implementation in a rural environment.

# **Principle 1: Identify Students Early**

Many factors contribute to students dropping out of school. These factors may not reach a critical level until the high school years, but they begin and impact each other during early educational experiences (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007). School-affected factors for academic success have been commonly identified through a variety of research and practitioner observation and analysis. Achieve, Inc., and Jobs for the Future (Jerald, 2006) identify the following factors.

* Age at least one year overage for grade level
* Poor or failing grades in mathematics and/or English language arts
* Poor standardized test performance
* Grade retention
* Poor attendance
* Discipline issues

Effective early identification requires multiple forms of information. In recent years, state educational and vendors have developed early warning systems that have the potential to identify at-risk students early in the educational process through faster and more reliable data analysis using a variety of factors or indicators. Early warning systems, matched with system needs, can play an important role in identifying at-risk students well before high school.

## Rural Impact

Early warning systems, while able to analyze large volumes of information, may provide challenges to rural school systems including being cost prohibitive. They may focus primarily on lagging indicators (parameters that exist as a result of conditions or circumstances occurring previously), analyze nationally normed instead of locally-normed risk factors, and fail to incorporate the *intimate knowledge* factor of a rural community. These rural communities often contain generational knowledge that is believed to be more accurate than multivariable data analysis systems. For these reasons, Early warning systems must be carefully matched to the rural community’s needs.

# **Principle 2: Closely Examine New and Existing School Policies and Procedures**

Schools across the nation are preparing students to be college and career ready through a focused approach closely aligned to academic performance. Academic performance is the driving force of this holistic approach due to the prevalence and availability of course grades and standardized assessment information and data (Mattern et al., 2014). The challenge of developing the highest level of performance on course grades and standardized assessments results in the development of strong policies and procedures around behaviors associated with academic performance. Examples include:

* strong attendance policies designed to encourage regular attendance. These policies often deny credit after a specific number of absences.
* zero tolerance policies, resulting in mandated suspensions or expulsions.
* extracurricular and cocurricular participation controlled by academic performance standards. These programs often support enrollment of a specific student population and is an extrinsically motivating factor in school attendance.

A variety of policies and procedures may inhibit school participation and success and likely encourage students to consider options other than school attendance. Systems and schools should routinely evaluate policies, procedures, and practices from the perspective of student barriers to success. A good intentioned policy might reduce opportunities for some students resulting in a disconnection or withdrawal from the school environment.

## Rural Impact

While the unintended consequences of increased apathy or school withdrawal may result from well-intentioned school policies and procedures, the rural student may experience fewer opportunities to recover and/or reverse the process. Attendance policies have the potential to force students out of school who are parents or responsible for others at home. Zero tolerance policies may place students in situations they cannot academically recover from, and extracurricular and cocurricular activity participation linked to academic performance may cause student withdrawal if that academic performance prohibits their participation in activities they enjoy.

# **Principle 3: Build Strong Community Partnerships and Personalize Your School**

Almost 20% of students who dropped out of school report they felt like they did not belong in that environment or they had challenges getting along with other students. Twenty-five percent reported they could not get along with teachers (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). Edwards and Edwards (2007) recommend building community partnerships and personalizing school to address these statistics. They emphasize three targets for partnership development:

* expose students to diverse, cultural opportunities;,
* partner with community businesses to seek funds, internships, etc.; and
* implement service-learning projects.

School personalization occurs when relationship development becomes a priority in schools or systems. This can be accomplished through extended student-adult contact time with strategies like looping and teaming (Edwards & Edwards, 2007).

## Rural Impact

Lower population density often with a similarly focused livelihood does not provide for the same diversity and cultural opportunities of a more urban environment. Community businesses are typically more sparse reducing internship and service-learning opportunities. However, strong community relationships among tight-knit community members are typically at the heart of rural schools. Family ties, neighborhood connections, and local history are more important than in urban or suburban contexts and require little cultivation by the rural principal to benefit students. Rural areas may also target the faith community to assist in the absence of or in conjunction with the business community. In areas where the faith community is strong, recruitment of local churches is essential to building a support structure for at-risk youth.

An Example of Utilizing the Faith Community in the Rural Context

In a rural area of South Carolina a small African-American church mobilized a variety of resources to support graduation rate improvement. After attending a principal-organized dropout prevention discussion among community leaders at Ware Shoals High School, Rev. James Davis decided to make high school graduation the theme of the youth ministry at Dunn Creek Baptist Church. Rev. Davis invited local educators into his church and organized youth services and events that focused on school success, youth responsibility, and the moral imperative of school completion. He taught parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles strategies for supporting young people in school. Cooperating with school administrators, Rev. Davis and his church led the Ware Shoals community to voice a consistent message of high expectations and graduation to all youth of the community. The focused initiative presented a consistent message to the students in the Ware Shoals High School district that the church and community supported strong high school completion goals and provided another layer of support to at-risk students.

# **Principle 4: Reduce Social Isolation**

School psychologists Hale and Canter (n.d.) indicate that students “must have something positive to look forward to that will meet the kinship/companionship needs of being a teenager. If they aren't able to meet these needs in the school setting, they often find ways to meet these needs in less desirable settings and groups.” A school principal has the responsibility and challenge of incorporating all students into the school community. There are several action steps that can be completed in this effort. They include:

Action Step 1: Identify Withdrawal Behavior

* Observe the student body for indications that any student (or group of students) is growing more aloof or withdrawing from others.

Action Step 2: Provide Leadership Support

* Implement staff professional learning that supports the identification of school isolation behaviors and defines strategies for alleviating or addressing those behaviors.
* Practice proactive measures to inhibit isolation opportunities. These may include assigning students to specific curricular groups or centers, modeling positive interactions with students, and identifying reasons students feel isolation and possibly abandonment.
* Support counseling and/or other forms of available assistance.

Action Step 3: Institute Direct Intervention

* Develop relationships with students experiencing isolation and/or withdrawing from the school community.
* Establish and monitor various types of mentoring programs including peer programs that pair incoming students with current students to avoid withdrawal or isolation because of unfamiliarity with the school and/or community.

Action Step 4: Serve as a Role Model

* Accept all students and provide opportunities for all students to be included in the school community; be willing to accept a perspective that is outside the norm.

## Rural Impact

Rural environments often embrace larger areas with smaller population densities than urban and suburban environments. Physical separation may result in reduced student relationship development. Effective initiatives to address social isolation involve strategies for building strong community partnerships. Through business partnerships, exposure to diversity, and participation in service-learning projects students have the opportunity to become involved. In a rural environment diverse exposure may be the most challenging. It is likely that the community is built around a single source of livelihood. This would attract similar workers with similar skills. Rural families often share the same revenue source and work toward a common goal with similar people in a homogeneous community reducing the opportunity for diversity exposure.

# **Principle 5: Manage Student Transitions**

Transitioning is a key factor inhibiting successful completion of school for many students (Alspaugh, 1998). The challenges of transitioning (e.g., from elementary school to middle school and/or middle school to high school) can result in an increased dropout rate. Alspaugh (2000) found increased numbers of transitions increased the dropout rate. The school system can usually control the frequency, number, and time of transitions. Transitioning is most destructive for older students. Alspaugh (2000) determined tenth-grade transitions to high school caused more dropouts than ninth-grade transitions. Transitioning is generally not a major concern for rural principals. Grade-to-grade and school-to-school transitions are usually less pronounced and personally disruptive for students in rural settings. Rural students often attend all grades on a single campus reducing the negative impact of transition across grade levels and campuses.

## Rural Impact

Student transition generally has a low impact on rural at-risk youth. An urban system often has multiple schools feeding into a single higher grade level school; however, rural schools often have all grade levels on one campus or each cohort of students move together through the transitions without the inclusion of other groups of students from other schools providing for greater structure and increased individual student emotional support.

# **Principle 6: Create Options and Implement Creative Interventions**

ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence (2002) reported that research indicates brain maturation does not stop until the teen years and sometimes into the 20s. Students who challenge their brain through ordering their thoughts, working to understanding abstract concepts, and controlling their impulses are building neural foundations for life. Maintaining students in an educational environment that challenges their brain has the effect of increasing the mental capacity of students that will extend throughout their life. Students at risk of dropping out of school may not only suffer long-term socioeconomic side effects but also physical side effects so it is important to maintain opportunities for students that provide for continued growth and development. At-risk students may experience a single challenge to school completion or a multitude of challenges. Identification of threats to school completion in each community is the responsibility of school leadership. Once the challenges to completion have been identified, options should be created that will assist students to overcome or work with these threats in constructive ways. Common challenges to school completion include:

* School Schedule Incompatibility
  + Solutions may include any of the following in isolation or in combination.
    - Alternative meeting times and locations.
    - Technology-based curricular options designed to alleviate scheduling issues for some students.
* Graduation Requirement Completion
  + Credit recovery programs may help students who are challenged to meet graduation requirements. Technology may be used to address the workforce challenges of credit recovery programs.
* Work Schedule Incompatibility
  + Work programs will assist in meeting educational goals of students with family financial responsibilities.
* Childcare Needs
  + Provided childcare options may help students who are also parents.
* Curriculum Irrelevance
  + Students with a strong focus on career preparedness may have difficulty participating in traditional curricular pathways designed for college after high school. At-risk students may be more “artistic” or “hands-on” learners. To address their needs professional development in the areas of learning styles and multiple intelligences may help faculty create curricula that are more relevant. Differentiated instructional strategies will provide students with options regarding content, process, and/or product modifications that can address multiple learning styles or individual learning modalities. Experienced teachers should continue to participate in professional development that addresses research-based and evidence-based best practices in order to provide students with the most current educational opportunities.

## Rural Impact

Creative interventions in rural schools are critical because small student numbers tend to reduce the variety of courses, programs, and offerings that are traditionally available. It is important that the rural principal establish a climate that expects graduation, looks for graduation barriers from the individual student perspective, and reinforces staff actions that remove barriers faced by students.

# **Principle 7: Build Parent/Family Relationships**

Communication is key to building strong parent/family relationships. Edwards and Edwards (2007) emphasized overcommunication should be the strategy for this type of relationship development. It is the responsibility of the school to be proactive and to work from the perspective of the parents/family in promoting the relationship. The lack of family engagement with school personnel is not evidence of disinterest in the child’s success at school; it may be an indicator of extensive work responsibilities, health challenges, etc. Students should not be ignored if the family appears indifferent. A family expectation placing low value on education should be addressed, and a strong focus on the need for and likelihood of graduation emphasized.

## Rural Impact

Rural communities occasionally focus on school as an unimportant component of a child’s life. Sometimes parents who did not graduate from school do not feel they have the ability to assist their children make decisions about school participation and completion nor do they feel they have an argument promoting school completion. Principals can help family members understand that graduation is in the best interest of the child and that parental expectation of educational attainment is not dependent on parent education levels. To the extent that the rural principal is able to orchestrate a consistent stay-in-school message from school personnel, family members, and the community, the likelihood of graduation is enhanced.

# **Conclusion**

Improvement of graduation rates cannot occur in isolation, but school leadership using data and community information can implement strategies and address conditions that may lead to increased graduation. While rural challenges are different from urban challenges, they are not insurmountable. The numerous risk factors identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network as correlated with nonschool completion fall into four domains—school, individual, family, and community. In a recent meta-analysis study that assigned effect size to several of the *15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention* (National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.), Chappell, O’Connor, Withington, and Stegelin (2015) determined that family engagement is likely to be the most impactful dropout prevention strategy available to educators. These strategies may be applied independently but work best when utilized in a strategic and systemic manner. They have been successful at all school levels from pre-K–12 and in rural, suburban, and urban centers (Smink & Schargel, 2004). All initiatives and interventions intended to improve graduation rates can be expected to be more effective when adapted in consideration of the specific situation and context rather than when applied generically. If the rural principal is to improve graduation outcomes, particular attention must be given to the key principles identified by Edwards and Edwards. These principles must be applied based on local circumstances and needs with a main focus on family engagement.

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