



F O C U S O N ISSUES

Critical

In This Issue



Top prevention strategies



Partnerships at work



STARS keeps teen parents in school

DROPPING OUT:

How can we stop the undertow of failure in school?

One-fourth of Oregon students who began as freshmen four years ago didn't walk across the high school stage last year to grab their diploma and shake the hand of a school board member.

The same is true across the country. Although dropout rates have been stable in recent years – lower, in fact, than 20 years ago – the need for education to live and work in today's world has never been greater.

The good news: If school boards focus precious resources where it matters the most — on early reading skills now, and alternative programs later, we'll see more and more caps and gowns gracing our stages each spring.

Students dropped out of Oregon public schools last year for many reasons – often resulting from a combination of social, family and school pressures. Among the major reasons were poor academic performance; low attendance; discipline problems; school was not considered relevant; working more than 15 hours a week; substance abuse; and pregnancy.

Oregon's dropout rate has remained stable, hovering around 7 percent annually. However the rate for Hispanic students – Oregon's fastest growing student population – was double that at 15 percent.

The increasing failure rate of minority youth is so alarming that OSBA's Board of Directors adopted a resolution last year pledging to target efforts to support dropout prevention, especially among this population. The OSBA also is active on the Governor's Summit for the Over-representation of Minority Youth in the Criminal Justice System.

With that focus in mind, this *Critical Issues* highlights several successful programs from elementary to high school – from Portland to Ontario. We also showcase strategies reaching all students at risk, such as the new "STARS" program for teens, programs for juvenile offenders and reaching kids through outside partnerships.

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Dropping Out

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Oregon's good reputation

Oregon schools deserve a pat on the back for pioneering many effective programs. We could have written several volumes. The few programs featured in this issue illustrate concepts and ideas that can be used elsewhere. We include a list of resources, many available through OSBA's Web Site.

"In our research we learned that Oregon has many outstanding programs," says Dr. Robert Barr, co-author of *Hope at Last for At-Risk Youth*, a comprehensive report tracing five years of dropout prevention research. Barr, current education dean at Boise State University (and former dean at Oregon State) recently keynoted for the Kansas School Boards Association and is a regular "Meet the Experts" panelist for the National School Boards Association.

Rates and comparisons aside, the need for education and career training is critical. Gone are the days when a 16-year-old can quit and get a decent job. To a dropout, the undertow of poverty, unemployment or crime has grown stronger . . . Close to 70 percent of today's prison inmates have low or no literacy skills, Barr noted, and most were high school dropouts.

The social costs to all of us include an underskilled labor force, lower productivity, lost taxes, increased public assistance and crowded prisons.

The third grade magic

Chances are good if dropout prevention starts with today's third graders.

"We can now predict with 90 percent accuracy whether today's third graders will drop out later," Barr said, noting four variables to the equation: If the child is poor, attends school with other poor students; is held back (retained)

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Top prevention strategies

To help boards plan dropout prevention programs and policies, the Northwest Regional Educational Lab recommends a strategy with 21 actions geared to the district level. Because of space limits, we'll share the major concepts; the entire list is available through OSBA's Web Site (Hot Topics) or by calling OSBA at 800-578-6722.

1. Make school dropouts a districtwide concern and focus on changing institutions rather than changing individuals.
2. Intervene early. The timing is critical, i.e., in preschool and middle school. Continuity of effort must be maintained.
3. Set and communicate high expectations.
4. Select and train teachers who are interested in working with at-risk students.
5. Recognize there is no one solution; risk factors are interrelated. Provide a broad range of programs to accommodate students with different needs.
6. Provide a package of services within each community. Collaborate with families, churches and other organizations. The strongest agreement among experts is the value of community-wide, multi-component programs.
7. Encourage programs that support parent involvement in all levels of their child's education.
8. Establish strong, permanent alternatives as part of a comprehensive strategy; these must be high-status programs, receiving resources commensurate with the success they demonstrate.
9. Develop a system to track dropout data, using it to identify groups at risk.
10. Train staff in methods to identify at-risk youth.

New Ontario High Program *Rescues Youth on Probation*

In the midst of reaching higher standards with new strategies, the most basic element of learning remains unchanged: To get the instruction, a student must be in school.

At Ontario High School, the focus isn't so much on reducing the dropout rate as it is on relevance – answering the "what's in it for me?" question.

"The philosophy at OHS is there are no throw-away kids," said Principal Shirley Vendrell. "We don't want any one of them to give up on their education and we show them that we aren't giving up on them. We are always looking for the hook that will keep a student in school. It may be athletics, Colors Club, our technology classes. We keep trying to show them the

relevance of education."

The newest hook targets the highest risk: young men on probation. Started by OHS teacher John Oliva, himself an OHS graduate, the program is a partnership with the Oregon Youth Authority, the Malheur County Juvenile Department and the Training Education Consortium in Ontario.

"These kids are all on probation and have been told to go to school, but they're not doing that," Oliva said. "They've been told to go to an alternative school, but they're not doing that either. For them, all that's left is getting kicked out of school."

Oliva won't let them off that easily. He meets with these students four days a week from 1:30 to 3 p.m., with community service activities from

3 to 5 p.m. The curriculum for this first group of 10 boys starting last November isn't reading, writing and arithmetic. It's even more basic than that.

"First, we talk about goal-setting," Oliva said. "These kids need a direction and they need something real."

The second portion of the curricu-

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RHYTHM *of the* NIGHT

Portland's Night High School draws on 25 years of experience in alternative education

For some students, attending high school during the day simply doesn't work.

Instead of concentrating on classes, grades and homework, many work full time to support themselves or care for a small child.

In 1973, a group of educators at Adams High School came up with an innovative idea: why not create a high school that operates at night, so students who are busy during the day can attend?

At first, the program served only Adams students. But when that campus closed, Portland Night High School (PNHS) moved to Grant and opened its

doors to students throughout the district. An average of 115 students is enrolled at any given time; ages range from 16 to 21. About 75 percent are employed (65 percent work 25 or more hours per week) and 15 percent are teen parents.

The program is designed to help these students and others who have not succeeded in the traditional setting to earn a standard diploma or GED certificate. PNHS classes are held 5 - 9:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and build reading, writing and mathematics skills through a variety of cross-disciplinary activities and experiences. Students are required to participate in a regular schedule of workplace or community activities.

Class offerings range from mass communication and songwriting to street law and astronomy. Teachers are flexible and dedicated, but ultimately each student is responsible for his or her success.

"Enrollment is entirely voluntary," says PNHS director Ginny DiMaggio. "Students are not 'sentenced' to attend. In fact, we do no recruiting. Most of our students hear about the program from other students who have attended, and make the choice to come here."

Ontario High Program

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lum deals with character. Discussions center around integrity, honesty, self-discipline, and patriotism.

"We talk about what it means to be patriotic; why is being self-disciplined helpful; who do they know who's honest - what do they like about that person."

Oliva said the objective is to get the students to think about who they are and who they want to be. The third focus is on career development. Students learn what interests them and what skills they want to build on.

Attendance is 100 percent - because that's what the court and probation officers require. Oliva believes that as time goes on, many attend because it has relevance for them.

"We have guest speakers and field trips so these kids can see outside their own little environments," Oliva said. "They can see a future with a lot more options."

He also focuses discussions on current events, such as a major lay-off by a big corporation and how that will affect them or the escalating situation in the Middle East and how that will affect them as they near the age of 18.

"It might sound kind of foo-foo, but it's all experimental and the response has been wonderful," Oliva said. "If they can't make it, they or the parents call. There's a lot of accountability."

Oliva credits Vendrell and associate principal John McDonough with getting a positive start. McDonough helped Oliva work with the Training Employment Consortium for a grant that will later provide these students pre-employment training as well as help pay their wages when an employer hires them. Students earn a half credit and at the semester break will have to decide whether to return to the regular classroom, find a program to work toward their GED or get a job.

"They might not choose to stay in school, although that's our goal," Oliva said. "But, at least we've given them some skills to be productive citizens, and maybe later they'll decide to return for their diploma or GED."

Article by Kathy Collins, Ontario School District public information specialist

Pick and choose from new guide

There is no shortage of educational alternatives in the Portland School District.

Each year, the district's Alternative Education office issues a 200-page report detailing about 60 alternative programs - half school-based and half community-based - available to students who need them.

For a copy of the latest report on district alternatives, call Director of Alternative Education Chet Edwards at (503)916-5858, ext. 431.



We can't do it alone: **The Need to Tear Down the Walls**

Educators can't solve the dropout problem alone. Social, health, crime and a host of other issues are creating the need to form partnerships between schools and communities.

For example, Bend is tackling the problem with a new juvenile center. Portland relies on the Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement to help Latino students and Salem Keizer helps students earn GEDs at a unique downtown partnership.

While the dropout rate appears to be relatively stable, school officials say that working with others to solve the problem is more critical than ever.

They point to factors such as the continuing loss of high-paying, low-skill jobs that once provided the less-educated with decent livings; the growth in at-risk youths who drop out at higher rates than other students, and the continued swelling of the Latino student population in Oregon – the ethnic group with the highest dropout rate.

Many of the leading dropout risk factors identified by researchers seem to have an Oregon stamp: high population growth, more low-income and single-parent families, and growing numbers of students who speak English as a second language. (The Latino student population has more than doubled in just the last seven years, according to

state figures.)

Even in Deschutes County, the fastest growing area east of the Cascades, officials with the Bend-La Pine School District say they are dealing with more students from poor, single-parent families, families that increasingly have serious problems that directly affect the behavior of students in school.

"It's clearly a trend here," said Tom Hayes, instructional services director at the district.

Some educators also fear that the tougher achievement standards could push more students out of the classroom. Indeed, one of the leading predictors for dropouts is poor academic performance.

Solving today's dropout problem cannot be separated from other issues that complicate teaching. Practically every school problem – from chronic money shortages to the more transient nature of students – influences dropout rates.

"If we don't partner with business and other agencies, we're not going to make it," said Hayes.

Surveys suggest that one of the common attributes of successful prevention programs is close working ties among schools, churches, families and private and public organizations.

"It's absolutely critical," said Maxine Thompson, coordinator of the Leaders Roundtable, a Portland committee of prominent citizens from private and public sectors established 15 years ago primarily to deal with the dropout issue.

Many schools have formed partnerships with private and public organizations, including local corrections agencies and service groups such as The Urban League in Portland. (The league runs the Portland Street Academy for middle and high school teens who dropped out of Portland Public Schools.) This trend

reflects a growing awareness by educators that they cannot solve the problem without help, and by community leaders who know that community health and education are tightly linked.

Bend's new juvenile center houses "Bridge"

In Deschutes County, a new \$8 million juvenile justice center opened this year, complete with an alternative school, free health clinic, housing for kids who need temporary shelter from abusive or dangerous homes, and space for an array of community service groups offering aid to troubled youths.

The Bend-LaPine School District provides teachers at the alternative school, and the district has created a system for referring students who could benefit from the center's many services.

Dennis Maloney, director of the county's Community Justice Department, said helping kids stay in school is one of the best crime-prevention strategies.

His logic reflects the thinking that feeds the trend toward partnering. Take the center's dental and health clinic open to any child who doesn't qualify for the Oregon Health Plan. There is a correlation between health care, education and crime, Maloney said.

He notes that surveys show that most prison inmates never completed high school. Most dropouts, he said, had serious truancy problems before they gave up on formal education. And, a recent survey conducted in the Bend-LaPine district found that two of the top causes of repeated truancy are toothache and head lice.

So, finding kids in the school system with bad teeth or lice, and getting them to the free clinic, just might keep someone out of jail in the future, he said.

The juvenile complex is also home to a unique alternative school called the Bridges Program. Its students include kids who have committed crimes and are there on court order, and those who appear to be headed

that way and join voluntarily. Paul Moore, director of the program, said the top aim of the school is to help students deal with personal issues so they can return to the regular classroom. He said they recognize that many students simply will not succeed in school until they learn how to cope with their emotional baggage. Because that is the priority, academics often takes second seat.

Meeting the unique needs of Latinos

Schools across the state are beginning to link with outside providers able to concentrate on the issues students face that can interrupt their education.

Portland area schools provide one of the best examples of the trend toward enlisting the assistance of non-school organizations to work with particular groups of students.

The growing number of Latino students, for example, presents unique challenges to Portland and other urban-area schools. These students drop out at three times the rate of the student population as a whole. According to the Oregon Department of Education, 15.7 percent of all Latino students dropped out in the 1996-1997 school year, compared with 6.7 percent for the general population. At that rate,

about 63 percent of the Latino students who started as freshmen will not receive diplomas though the traditional school program.

Luis Machorro, director of the Portland Public Schools ESL program, concluded that in-house efforts to stem the flood of Latino dropouts just don't work.

After repeated failures to adequately serve Latino students within the public school structure, Machorro finally turned elsewhere.

The Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement, OCHA, a private non-profit organization, now provides alternative education for about 150 Portland-area Latino students. "OCHA can better serve these students because it is more adept at referring them to other groups and agencies for specific problems," he said. "And, OCHA is not burdened by restrictive hiring policies that often prevent employing the people best able to serve these students."

District staff layoff-recall rules often led to assigning teachers who were not equipped to meet the special needs of Latinos, he added. For example, physical education and music teachers, whose own programs were cut but who had employment preferences, often struggled to deal with Spanish-speaking students.

Because OCHA is not bound by district labor contracts, it has more

hiring flexibility and is able to pay teachers less, allowing it to hire more staff to increase the individual attention students need.

Salem downtown center offers GED help

In Salem, the Downtown Learning Center has become "the last hope" for many students who have already dropped out – or want to leave school early to begin a career.

Staff from Salem-Keizer School District and Chemeketa Community College, along with donated space from the City of Salem, help young adults earn GEDs. Students attend anywhere from one or two days, to one or two years. Schedules are as individual as student skill levels. Some students are "fast-tracking" out of high school to a community college or vocational trade, while others, including special education students, are working at a slower pace.

"Many of our students had to drop out of school because of jobs to support families," said Site Coordinator Steve Rosen. "Also, many of our kids wouldn't go to Chemeketa, which is geared to adult students, so this is their best hope."

Anywhere from 500 to 700 students walk through the center's "revolving door" of intensive two-hour teaching sessions each day. Independent study is part of the program. Last year 167 students received their GEDs.

"Thanks to the City of Salem, our downtown location is rent-free, while being accessible to the public transportation many of our students need," said Rosen. High school-age students are taught by Salem-Keizer teachers while Chemeketa staff teach students over age 18.

"The center's popularity has grown and we're close to capacity," Rosen said, noting that he'd like to see more school districts offering similar services within the regular high school where students can still be part of the school culture and join club or athletic activities. "Students need all sorts of options to succeed."

As resources decline The Need Increases

Looking to outside groups to provide the spectrum of services the most vulnerable students need, including alternative schools, is the key to bringing dropout rates down, according to Maxine Thompson of the Leaders Roundtable, a Portland group established to tackle the dropout issue.

"It's an issue that is so complex that there isn't any single entity that alone can deal with it. And now, in a time of declining resources, it's even more important for schools to reach out. There's housing and transportation issues, there's recreation, there's public safety. Everything has to be working in sync," she said.



STARS

Promises to reduce teen pregnancy rates

It's hard to stay in school when you're pregnant or parenting. School and community support programs help, but a significant number of teen parents end up dropping out – 61 percent of fathers and 50 percent of mothers nationally.

Encouraging young people to say no to sexual involvement and premature parenthood is the goal of Students Today Aren't Ready for Sex (STARS), an abstinence

training program championed by Oregon First Lady Sharon Kitzhaber. Launched in 1995 as a demonstration project in four Portland middle schools, the program is now offered in 31 of Oregon's 36 counties.

STARS is straightforward in its approach: Older teens present the message that it's better not to have sex, and coach younger kids in how to say no when the pressure is on. The program is based on a

curriculum called Postponing Sexual Involvement developed by Dr. Marion Howard of Emory University/Grady/Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia.

In an independent evaluation conducted four years after the program began in Oregon, 70 percent of middle school students said the program helped them abstain, while 77 percent said it helped them understand their right to set limits. Oregon students who were sexually active or at risk educationally were even more likely to use STARS skills, according to the study. A five-year study in Georgia showed a 33 percent reduction in teen pregnancy rates among youngsters who received the training.

"Most middle school students don't want to have sex, but they think everybody else is doing it," Kitzhaber says. "They aren't mature enough to see the long-range consequences of their actions. If we can teach them refusal skills before they get to eighth grade, we have a chance to make a difference."

For more information about STARS, contact program director David Lane, Ph.D., Oregon Health Division, at (503) 731-4331 or David.S.Lane@state.or.us.

How to identify at-risk students

To intervene early, be aware of some common indicators of an adolescent at risk of failing in school, including:

1. *Attention problems as a young child* – The school should have a history of attention problems or disruptive behavior.
2. *Multiple retentions in grade* – The student has been retained for at least one year.
3. *Poor grades* – Consistent performance at barely or below average.
4. *Absenteeism* – Absent five or more days per term.
5. *Lack of connection with the school* – The student is not involved in sports, music or other school extracurricular activities.

STARS is just one strategy in the governor's statewide Teen Pregnancy Prevention Action Agenda. Others include:

- Positive community values and norms;
- Skills for life;
- Responsible sex education;
- Contraception access;
- Legal issues and protections.

Hood River: *Cruising the Orchards*

While most people are firing up the barbecue on a summer evening, James Sims is traversing the immigrant labor camps of Hood River's orchards.

It's here that Sims finds one of Hood River School District's most valued resources – parents of school-age children.

Sims, director of federal programs for the Hood River School District and principal of an elementary school whose population is 78 percent Latino, believes parent trust and support are keys to his success in preventing dropouts and fostering high achievement.

Many school district migrant programs run "by the numbers" rather than a "human orientation," he said. "With our Hispanic students, we've created an environment much like our culture of 25 years ago."

This brings Sims and teachers to labor camps to recruit students, bring a gift book to new parents, and register kindergarteners. Within the schools, it's a cadre of caring adults constantly checking on students.

More tangible programs also

figure strongly in Hood River School District's student retention:

- Summer migrant school emphasizes language proficiency.
- Summer Academy raises skills of any student not meeting benchmarks.
- Evening tutoring for high school students working day jobs allows for credit make-up, language development, or core subject improvement.
- The Newcomer Center at the high school enables new non-English speaking students to spend up to one year gaining language skills. Upon leaving the center, students learn core subjects in classrooms led by a bilingual teacher and instructional aide.
- Sims' Pine Grove Elementary provides a total program of

regular classrooms supported by schoolwide Title I reading and a migrant program geared to educate all students. In this inclusion model, students are pulled out of class only for pre-teaching and re-teaching. As high goals are achieved, Pine Grove continually raises its standards.

From a dropout rate of 15 percent in the early 1990s, Hood River has curbed the number to 7.2 percent – despite an increasing Latino population with a historically high dropout rate.

"People visit our schools expecting miracles," Sims says. "Right down from the superintendent, it's the human element keeping our kids in school."

Willamina: Where Opportunity Knocks

Willamina Middle School Principal Buz Tautfest once watched with frustration as students marched along the dropout path: falling behind in middle school, then struggling for a couple of years before quitting altogether.

Today Tautfest has a roadblock on that well-worn path in the form of Willamina Middle School's Opportunity Center. Operated as a school within a school, the center strives to equip students who are falling behind with the academic skills necessary to succeed and remain in school.

A student lagging academically attends the Opportunity Center full time for two weeks of concentrated work in core subject areas. If succeeding after the two-week period, the student eases back into mainstream elective classes.

"We don't want students to fail and we won't put them back into a core class they won't pass," says Tautfest. "Our goal is to have them return at the same level as their peers."

Now in its third year, the Opportunity Center sees about 60 percent of its students successfully return to regular classes.

The center operates out of a single classroom, with regular classroom teachers rotating in for one period of their day. A teacher's aide remains in the classroom managing records and routing completed homework to teachers. Student enrollment is limited to 12 per period. Students with significant behavioral issues attend the district's alternative school.

"It gives students that light they have to see in order to stick it out," Tautfest says.



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<http://www.orlocalgov.org/osba>



Dropping Out

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during the first three years; and can't read at the third grade level.

"You have the best window of opportunity to reverse the problem if you can make sure the child reads when he leaves the third grade," Barr said. "Reading is the trip-wire. It's just that powerful. After that, the challenge is massive. You can trace the slow, steady death of self-esteem. They can't read, fall behind, feel dumb, can't do homework and become discipline problems."

Barr strongly urges that boards set policies to "ensure that every child will learn to read" and that progress be closely monitored in non-punitive ways. "I strongly believe that is their birth right. Our five years of gathering research across the country is proving that all children can learn."

Barr also tells boards the second most effective thing they can do is to make sure alternative classes and programs are in middle and high school. "You need smaller programs with teachers who build strong relationships in a demanding but caring atmosphere. Also connect with community colleges. Oregon has an outstanding resource in its Alternative Education Association."

Carole Smith, director of the Open Meadow Learning Center in Portland (named last year's Alternative Education Program of the Year) echoes Barr's belief in relationships and work-related learning experiences.

"Creating strong, positive relationships for kids with caring adults is our focus," she says. "The bottom line is that we build assets in kids so they can succeed. In many cases, we provide the first positive relationship they've had with an outside adult."

Information sources for the above story include the Oregon Department of Education's Dropout Report (1996-97); on-line reports from the School Improvement Research Series (SIRS), Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Link to the NWREL site through OSBA's Web Site.

More resources

Hope at Last for At-Risk Youth - Step-by-step descriptions of effective programs. Bob Barr and William Parrett, 1995, Allyn & Bacon publishers.

From the Northwest Regional Educational Lab: *Alternative Schools: Caring for Kids on the Edge*, NW Education, Summer 1998 issue, and *Community Building: New Models*, NW Education, Winter 1999 issue. Available on-line through OSBA's Web Site/Hot Topics/At-Risk Youth.

School Improvement Research Series (SIRS)- Check these topics: "Reducing the Dropout Rate" and "Effective Schooling Practices and At-Risk Youth," Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Available through OSBA's Web Site/Hot Topics/At-Risk Youth.

Staying in School: Partnerships for Educational Change, Ian M. Evans et al., 1995. Paul H. Brooks Publishing, P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285-0624. Also available from ERIC, which can be accessed through OSBA's Web Site/Hot Topics/At-Risk Youth.

Alternatives: The Opportunity of a Lifetime - Handbook for developing programs by the Oregon Dept. of Education, (503) 378-3310 ext. 485.

The New Alternative Schools, Educational Leadership journal, September 1994 issue, 800-933-2723.

Dropout Report for 1996-97, Oregon Department of Education, released Feb. 24, 1998. Also available on OSBA's Web Site/Hot Topics/At-Risk Youth.

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