

TOO MANY TEXAS STUDENTS GET STUCK IN THE MIDDLE GRADES

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Roughly defined as grades fourth through eighth, the middle grades are a known pressure point in the education pipeline – a make or break period for determining future academic success. Research has shown that students who are not proficient in reading by the beginning of fourth grade are four times more likely to drop out of school.ⁱ Sixth graders with one of the following risk factors have only a 15 – 25 percent chance of graduating high school on time.ⁱⁱ

- Failed math or English,
- Less than an 85 percent attendance rate, or
- Unsatisfactory behavior in a core course

During the 2014-15 school year, eight percent of Texas dropouts, just over 2,500 students, left school in the seventh or eighth grade.ⁱⁱⁱ The Texas Education Agency (TEA) does not track the number of students who leave school before the seventh grade.

LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS TO REDUCE DROPOUT IN THE MIDDLE GRADES

CREATE AN EARLY WARNING DATA SYSTEM PILOT PROGRAM

Research from the Johns Hopkins University School of Education identified three early indicators to predict a student's risk of dropping out of school. Coined the "ABC's of secondary school success," these indicators include Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance. Students who are off-track in just one of these indicators in the sixth grade have only a 15-25 percent chance of graduating high school on time.^{iv}

The Texas High School Completion and Success Initiative was showing some success in preventing dropouts, but the legislature eliminated funding for the Initiative's early warning data system as part of the \$5.3 billion funding cut to public education in 2011.^v That system focused on grades 9 to 12 at a limited number of districts; the state has not previously piloted an early warning data system in the middle grades.

RECOMMENDATION: The state should start a pilot program early warning data system that begins in the sixth grade at a select number of campuses that receive a D or F rating in the new accountability system. The data system should be based on currently collected data on attendance, behavior, and performance in core courses.

STUDY BEST PRACTICES FOR DROPOUT RECOVERY IN TEXAS

When students leave school before high school, the barriers to re-entry are even greater. In Texas, there is not a clear path back into the classroom for early-leavers. Only a handful of alternative education programs, often referred to as Dropout Recovery Schools, accept students below the ninth grade level, and students need to be

at least 16 years-old before they are eligible to earn a certificate of high school equivalency. As a result, early-leavers can find themselves in educational limbo for several years before opportunities to continue their education are available.

RECOMMENDATION: The Texas Education Agency should conduct a study on best practices for re-engaging students who dropped out in the seventh and eighth grades. The study would aim to identify innovative approaches, such as providing credit recovery programs and summer school options that help students who dropped out during the middle grades get back on track to rejoin their peers in the classroom.

STRENGTHEN SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS AT-RISK OF DROPPING OUT

Mentoring has a positive impact on school attendance and recurring behavior problems. At-risk youth who have mentors miss fewer days of school, maintain better attitudes toward school, and are more likely to attend college.^{vi} The National Mentoring Resource Center found that school-based mentoring is especially beneficial during the middle school years when the first signs of dropping out are often seen.^{vii}

Students who are behind academically also need structured learning time outside of the regular school day. The Expanded Learning Opportunities Council, created in 2013 to study out-of-school learning opportunities and make recommendations to the legislature, found that expanded learning opportunities provide safe places and improve academic achievement by providing supplemental educational activities. However, access to quality programs, especially for schools with high concentrations of poverty, is currently very limited.

RECOMMENDATION: Strengthen academic and social supports for students at risk of dropping out in the middle grades. Low-levels of funding and threat of elimination hamper the limited interventions currently available. To keep students in the middle grades on track, school districts need reliable funding and the flexibility to invest in the programs and interventions that meet their unique needs. The most equitable method to direct additional funds to schools for these purposes, while also ensuring school districts have flexibility, is to increase the Basic Allotment and Compensatory Education weight in the school finance formulas.

ⁱ Fiester, Leila. Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of the Third Grade Matters. A KIDS COUNT Special Report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation; 2010.

ⁱⁱ Middle School Matters Institute; The Importance of Middle School. <https://greatmiddleschools.org/the-importance-of-middle-school/>; accessed January, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Texas Education Agency. Annual Drop Out rate, 2014-15 https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/acctres/drop_annual/1415/state.html; access January 2017.

^{iv} Balfanz, R. Annual Conference for Middle Level Education 2016 (AMLE2016) Keynote Address. Austin, TX; October 2016.

^v Learning Points Associates, an affiliate of American Institute for Research, and Gibson Consulting Group, Inc. Texas Ninth Grade Transition and Intervention (TNGTI) Grant Program: January 2011 Evaluation Report; January 2011.

^{vi} The National Mentoring Partnership. Mentoring Impact. <http://www.mentoring.org/why-mentoring/mentoring-impact/>; accessed January 2017.

^{vii} National Mentoring Resource Center. School-based Mentoring Program for At-Risk Middle School Youth. <http://www.nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/index.php/insight-display/48-school-based-mentoring-program-for-at-risk-middle-school-youth.html>; accessed January 2017.

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