California Dropout Research Project
UC Santa Barbara | Gevirtz Graduate School of Education

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THE DISTRICT ROLE IN GRADUATION RATE IMPROVEMENT: PROMISING PRACTICES FROM FIVE CALIFORNIA DISTRICTS

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Highlights:

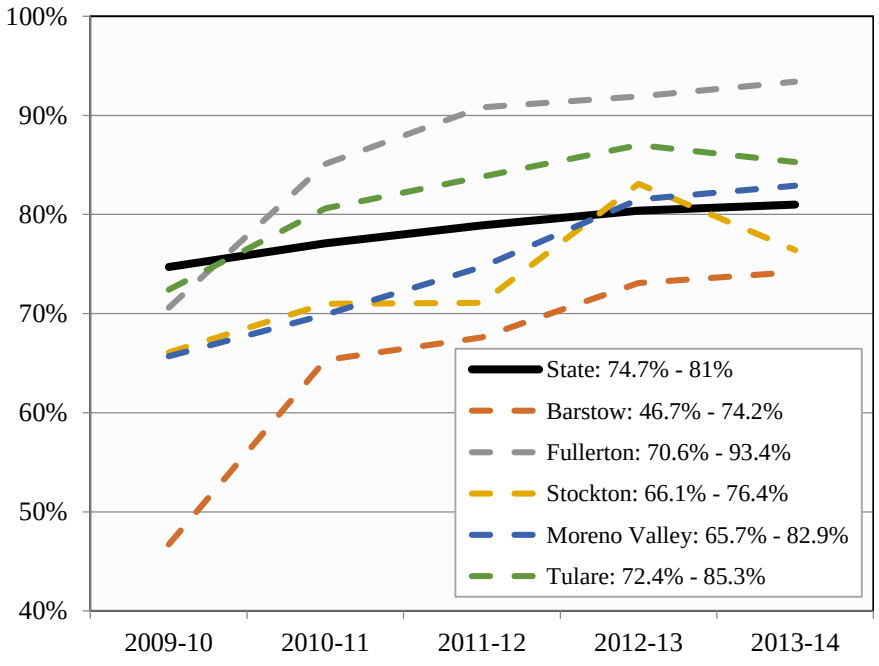
Districts play an important role in designing policies and supporting practices that increase graduation rates:

- **Have district leaders provide a clear vision and create a sense of urgency that drives school change. Leaders communicate the importance of the vision by aligning policies, sharing responsibility for outcomes, allocating resources, and creating tools to support student success.**
- **Build data systems to provide timely access to accurate data that support decision making (e.g., building a sense of urgency, holding schools accountable, and making decisions about resource allocation and professional development).**
- **Provide opportunities for staff to learn with and from one another: District leaders play an important role in convening school staff to examine data together and to learn about strategies that are succeeding in other schools.**
- **Provide students with a menu of school and credit recovery options as well as intervention programs for at-risk students**

While evidence is mounting about school-level programs and policies that contribute to increased high school graduation rates, little attention is being paid to the role that districts can play in creating conditions for improving graduation outcomes for students.

This brief is based on a study that describes district-level strategies in five of California's 10 districts with the largest increases in graduation between 2009-10 and 2012-13. Interviews with leaders from these five districts focused on their perceptions of the key strategies for improving graduation rates. Qualitative analyses help to reveal some of the district efforts to address the complex challenge of raising high school graduation rates and offer suggestions for adaption by other districts or further study.

Figure 1: State and District Cohort Graduation Rates 2009-10 thru 2013-14



SOURCE: California Department of Education, DataMart

Read the full report at: *cdrp.ucsb.edu*

Summary of Findings

Data Use

One of the most common practices cited by respondents that contributed to increased graduation rates was data use. The districts in this study used data in a variety of ways, first by uncovering the scope of the problem to create a sense of urgency. Then, building upon research that has validated early warning indicators of risk, districts collect and report those data more frequently (monthly, in most cases). Those district-level, data-based conversations spur school-level actions including interventions and placement practices and policies for the most at-risk students. Data use is a foundational practice on which the districts have built a number of other organizational practices and policies.

Using data to create a sense of urgency

District Leader: *We came up with a theme called 'excellence on purpose' and … how we do things on purpose, and not leave it to chance, including our graduation rates. So that was more the sense of urgency, creating this culture that things are going to be different and they're not going to be just different, but they would be measurably different.*

Convening

Improving districts were also conveners, allowing district and school leaders to learn from their colleagues across schools and across other districts. During regular meetings (most often monthly), district leaders met with high school principals and counselors to discuss progress and strategies for addressing student needs. Nearly all respondents pointed to the importance of collaboration and prioritizing collaboration. One school leader said that the opportunity to learn from one another and think more deeply about the needs of specific students was essential to the school's success. These conversations often led to healthy competition among district and school leaders, and also created opportunities for school leaders to point out where district policies hamper improvement.

Staffing

Nearly all respondents noted the importance of districts ensuring that schools have the right staff for supporting students. This challenge emerged in different ways in the districts we interviewed. One district focused a great deal of their attention on ensuring that high schools had adequate counseling ratios and that the counselors were being held accountable for regular meetings and individual learning plans for every one of their students. And nearly all mentioned the importance of hiring and retaining teachers who are not only committed to the district's efforts to improve graduation rates, but who also can connect with disengaged youth.

Policies

Policies are an opportunity for districts to ensure that there are options for ways in which students reach graduation. All respondents agreed that the traditional, comprehensive high school is not necessarily appropriate for every student and pointed to the importance of addressing policies that hinder access to alternatives to the comprehensive high school. All districts reported creating a more flexible "menu" of options (for example, school choices, or credit recovery options) from which students could select. Respondents also noted the need to address policies regarding mobility between more traditional schools and alternative schools and other credit recovery opportunities. For example, one district administrator described increasing access to credit recovery options by abolishing a policy that prevented students who had been suspended during the regular academic year from attending summer school.

Additionally, respondents mentioned instituting assessment policies designed to capture student learning early and often or to smooth students' transitions between high school and higher education. For example, one district established an articulation agreement with a local institution of higher education to grant student admission and base placement decisions on students' English language arts assessment junior year and their performance on a college preparatory English course in senior year.

Support for intervention programs

Interventions at the district and school levels are important to addressing students' needs. In fact, academic supports and personalized learning were the most commonly cited strategies that accounted for the positive results. The programs mentioned vary and address social-emotional, behav-

ioral, and academic supports for students. Districts provide resources for implementation of these programs (such as additional personnel costs, materials and facilities) and provide access to a broader array of resources and expertise beyond the district (such as knowledge of effective strategies being implemented in other districts).

Other contextual factors

Beyond the actions the districts can take, there are contextual factors that leaders attribute to their ability to support students.

Leadership consistency: Several respondents pointed to the importance of consistency in maintaining momentum of district-wide efforts. This kind of consistency was noted as an important factor in their success, allowing interventions to take root and to adjust when the data suggested that adjustments were necessary, rather than starting from scratch.

Partnerships and grants: Several of the districts mentioned that they have strategically identified community partnerships and applied for grants which have supported their efforts to improve outcomes for students. One district sought out community based organizations and businesses willing to adopt a school. Another district mentioned that they have been the beneficiaries of several years of grants that focus on preventing dropouts.

Creating buy-in and modeling a culture of caring

When people in key leadership roles have a vested interest in the success of our district and have a vested interest in the community, that sets an example and a model for our support staff and for our teaching staff. I don't want to say it's as simple as that, but sometimes I really believe it's as simple as that. You lead by example and you have that culture and people believe in that.

Advice from District and School Leaders

Build caring relationships with staff, parents, and students

All five of the districts emphasized the importance of forming strong relationships with others in order to have an impact on graduation rates. Some respondents described the respect and care with which they treat their staff, hoping that by modeling these relationships, they will encourage teachers and other school staff to treat their students in the same way. One said, "Just like with kids, teachers don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Focus on continuous improvement

Respondents described aspects of a continuous improvement cycle. One district administrator reiterated the importance of sharing successes from this process with school staff, students, and parents to make sure they understood that their work was paying off. Many respondents noted that this process takes time and persistence, rather than shifting priorities or starting new initiatives every year. A district superintendent commented, "Don't look for a quick fix. There is no quick fix. You have to develop a system-wide approach to improving the graduation and dropout rate."

Conclusion

The common practices and policies gleaned from these five districts provide insight into the role districts can play in improving graduation rates. Indeed, these districts represent a range of settings, from urban, to suburban, to rural districts and are geographically located throughout California. This suggests that there may be commonalities that transcend contextual differences.

Although we gain initial insights from this study, several questions remain. For example, will districts that have achieved graduation rate gains be able to sustain their increased graduation rates over time? Sustaining growth over time is often as challenging as achieving it in the first place. What are the interventions that work for students and when? Disentangling how to determine what type of supports students need is complex and a great need among schools. Specifically, how do alternative pathways to graduation, such as alternative or online credit recovery options work and for which students are they best suited? Finally, while the on time graduation rates have improved, there are still students who are not graduating. How do districts address the intractable and complex problem of reengaging students who have left the school system? Further research should consider this and the other questions uncovered, but unanswered by the current report.

Research Reports and Policy Briefs in Print

1. The Economic Losses from High School Dropouts in California *(August 2007)*
2. The Return on Investment for Improving California's High School Graduation Rate
3. Does State Policy Help or Hurt the Dropout Problem in California?
4. Can Combining Academic and Career-Technical Education Improve High School Outcomes in California?
5. Student and School Predictors of High School Graduation
6. California Schools that Beat the Odds in High School Graduation
7. Alternative Pathways to High School Graduation: An International Comparison
8. Giving a Student a Voice to California's Dropout Crisis
9. Building System Capacity for Improving High School Graduation Rates in California
10. Improving California's Student Data Systems to Address the Dropout Crisis
11. Struggling to Succeed: What Happened to Seniors Who Did Not Pass the California High School Exit Exam?
12. Can Middle School Reform Increase High School Graduation Rates?
13. Middle School Predictors of High School Achievement in Three California School Districts
14. What Factors Predict High School Graduation in the Los Angeles Unified School District?
15. Why Students Drop Out: A Review of 25 Years of Research
16. High School Dropouts and the Economic Losses from Juvenile Crime in California
17. The Connection Between Health and High School Dropout
18. The High School Dropout Dilemma and Special Education Students
19. The English Learner Dropout Dilemma: Multiple Risks and Multiple Resources

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2008 Policy Committee Report

"**Solving California's Dropout Crisis**"

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Project Web Site:

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All of the above Research Reports and Policy Briefs, as well as Statistical Briefs, are available at www.cdrp.ucsb.edu

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