High school graduation rates depend on what happens in individual schools and classrooms. But it’s crucial to remember that graduation is a systemic issue, not just a school-level issue. Prior attendance levels and academic readiness of the entering 9th-grade class largely determine high school graduation rates.

Even a district-level focus isn’t sufficient, because students increasingly migrate among districts, and state policies dramatically influence all districts. That means that coordinated statewide efforts are crucial in addressing the dropout issue.

A unique collaborative effort in Colorado, the Colorado Graduates Initiative (CGI), provided several important lessons. After participating in this effort as a Colorado education policy advocate (Groginsky) and
a university researcher (MacIver), together with other Colorado partners, we identified seven factors that must be present to build an effective statewide collaborative effort to increase high school graduation rates.

1. Leadership to unite diverse stakeholders on specific, common goals and to catalyze them into action;
2. A focus on data, particularly on actionable, early warning indicators;
3. Active participation of district leaders in discussing student-level data focused on behavioral dropout characteristics and early warning indicators;
4. External support to allow districts to critically examine their own policies and practices related to dropout indicators;
5. A systematic framework for recommended dropout prevention steps;
6. Simultaneous progress on shaping state-level policy related to dropout prevention and recovery; and
7. Commitment by all stakeholders to active participation in a learning community characterized by a perpetual cycle of inquiry.

**Leadership**

Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter set an ambitious goal in 2007:

About 30% of Colorado high school students don’t graduate. Less than half of the black, Latino, and American Indian students who start high school in Colorado actually finish. Our goal: cut the dropout rate in half within 10 years.

Leadership is obviously required for a state to meet this goal. In Colorado, the governor began the process by setting the vision, but another sort of leadership was necessary to build the infrastructure that could achieve it. In early 2008, the Donnell-Kay Foundation, a Denver-based foundation with a longstanding interest in addressing the dropout crisis, stepped up to assume leadership for the nuts and bolts of turning this goal into a reality. Joining the public and private sectors was crucial in building a collaboration that could successfully address the dropout issue.

The Donnell-Kay Foundation brought together key stakeholders and quickly catalyzed them into action. The stakeholders included a statewide advocacy group (the Colorado Children’s Campaign), education nonprofit organizations (Partnership for Families and Children and the National Center for School Engagement, together with Colorado Youth for a Change), and two Colorado districts that already had relationships with these organizations and large numbers of dropouts. Representatives from the Colorado Department of Education and the Governor's Office also participated

Once the Donnell-Kay Foundation had served its role in catalyzing the group into action, it stepped back to allow the Colorado Children’s Campaign to take the lead.

**A Focus on Data**

Unlike many previous dropout prevention efforts, this collaboration began by immediately focusing on data and how those data could inform action. Influenced by research by scholars at Johns Hopkins University, the Donnell-Kay Foundation invited those researchers to consult with the newly founded Statewide Dropout Initiative (later named the Colorado Graduates Initiative). As the team discussed the development of an action plan in early 2008, the need for solid data-based decision making was evident. Team members had already begun to analyze areas where dropouts were concentrated in the state, and they were beginning to focus on several key districts that produced the largest number of dropouts. Johns Hopkins’ researchers, who were at the time working with America’s Promise to complete the *Grad Nation* guidebook, also emphasized the need for districts to examine their own data on graduation and dropouts to understand the specific characteristics of their dropouts. While aggregate school-level data broken down by demographic categories were readily available in Colorado, as in most states, the crucial longitudinal analyses of individual students (and their behavioral predictors from previous years) were not.

Because this type of analysis wasn’t routinely conducted in Colorado, and because district resources didn’t permit allocation of staff time to such a project, the Donnell-Kay and Piton foundations funded studies by Johns Hopkins researchers in several Colorado districts. Research already demonstrated the

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Dropouts in each of the five districts displayed behavioral warning signs (the ABCs of poor attendance, behavior problems, and course failure) several years before they dropped out.
links among student behavior problems, chronic absence, course failure, and dropping out in other district studies, but it was important to verify that these factors had the same influence in Colorado.

**DISTRICT LEADERS**

Though it was a statewide collaborative effort, the districts needed to focus on their own student-level data. Five Colorado districts agreed to share longitudinal, de-identified, student-level data with Johns Hopkins researchers and to identify practices that needed to change. By fall 2008, reports for two districts had been delivered, and the other three reports followed in winter 2009. Results in the five districts were similar (MacIver, Balfanz, and Byrnes 2009). Dropouts in each of the five districts displayed behavioral warning signs (the ABCs of poor attendance, behavior problems, and course failure) several years before they dropped out. While not perfect predictors of dropping out, these indicators distinguished dropouts from graduates rather dramatically. Among the dropouts in the five districts, more than three in four had failed one or more semester courses in 9th grade (compared to between one-fifth and one-third of graduates with the same indicator). A large majority displayed patterns of chronic absenteeism. Nearly half had been suspended at least once during the previous four years (compared to only about a quarter of the graduates).

Among the 2003-04 cohort of 9th graders (Class of 2007), the percentage of students graduating on time declined steadily for each semester failure in 9th grade. More than three-quarters of those with zero failures graduated, but this fell to a graduation rate of just 10% to 12% among those with five or more semester failures in 9th grade. Overall, less than 30% of those with one or more failures in 9th grade graduated on time.

At one level, the findings weren’t at all surprising. As some district officials pointed out, “everyone already knows” that students who drop out have had problems in attendance, behavior, and course performance. But schools and districts are only beginning to pay systematic attention to these behavioral early warning indicators.

Some districts established a process for middle and high school principals to reflect on school-specific data, particularly the percentage of current middle school students and 9th graders failing courses and displaying chronic absenteeism. The data influenced their planning for interventions designed to increase attendance and reduce course failure. Districts also met at a statewide dropout summit in October 2009 to share ideas and analyze student data, policies, and practices.

**EXTERNAL SUPPORT**

Having external support for the process of critical self-reflection emerged as an important factor. With the help of technical assistance from nonprofit organizations in the collaborative (the National Center for School Engagement and Colorado Youth for a Change), participating districts conducted audits of their policies and practices associated with student attendance, behavior, and course performance. This process uses a team-based survey approach to uncover counterproductive practices (such as suspension for truancy, not allowing students to make up work missed during unexcused absences, grading policies that don’t allow students to recover from early failures during the semester, etc.). Once such counterproductive policies and practices are uncovered, the districts need to work through a consensus-building process aimed at changing practices into more productive ones. One of these districts agreed to follow up with professional development for teachers and administrators focused on dropout prevention. With technical assistance from external providers from the collaborative, another district is designing an early warning and intervention system to transform student behaviors and prevent dropping out. Another district is sharing findings with other districts in its county to create a countywide dropout prevention collaborative.

**A SYSTEMATIC FRAMEWORK**

While districts can often point to numerous dropout prevention and recovery strategies in their master plans and individual school improvement plans, they must systematically and honestly assess whether the components are integrated in a way that’s actually effective. Piecemeal approaches may resemble a pretty patchwork quilt, but they’re rarely effective in ensuring that all students who are falling off track to graduation are identified and receive the interventions they need. While the details for each
school will necessarily differ, integrated whole-school reforms and school-level student support structures are necessary. These support structures will also require district-supported, user-friendly, real-time data systems that will allow schools to implement early warning systems and tiered interventions for struggling students.

The recommendations in the Colorado report follow a public health approach. They suggest that districts create a three-stage prevention model at all middle and high schools.

The first stage involves districtwide and schoolwide reforms to provide quality instruction that promotes engaged learning and successful high school completion. In addition, this primary stage includes a whole-school approach to encouraging regular attendance and other positive behaviors. These primary prevention strategies often succeed by themselves for two-thirds to three-quarters of the students. But an early warning system is still crucial for identifying students who are falling off-track to graduation through struggles in attendance, behavior, and course failure.

Targeted efforts for smaller groups of students make up the secondary stage of the prevention model. These efforts focus on students who need additional supports beyond the schoolwide reforms.

The model’s third stage involves intensive intervention efforts, often one-on-one and involving specialists in social work and mental health.

Researchers at the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, in conjunction with City Year and Communities in Schools, are currently implementing this model (Diplomas Now) in several states, with encouraging early results.

STATE POLICY

Since districts and schools respond to the incentive structures that govern them, it was particularly crucial for this collaborative effort to focus on shaping state policy. A key partner in the collaborative is the Colorado Children’s Campaign (CCC), which has focused on state-level policies and legislation that influence dropout and graduation outcomes. Establishing consistent state policy on defining dropouts and calculating graduation rates was particularly important, given the normal tendency for local school districts to calculate outcomes in ways that produced the best results for themselves, for example, by counting undocumented withdrawals as transfers and GED completion as graduation. The CCC had drafted state legislation in 2005 to standardize graduation, completion, dropout, and mobility rates. The Colorado State Board of Education ultimately adopted a rule to standardize the rates in line with national best practices.

As the collaborative was being formed in early 2008, the CCC proposed bipartisan legislation to require the state to annually produce data on an important early warning indicator: the number of students who are habitually truant. The bill’s enactment ensured that districts’ measurements of these rates were regularized. At the same time, the CCC was writing comprehensive legislation to require school districts to assess their practices and develop graduation and completion plans. The bill, which was en-

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I made the decision to do all teacher appraisals and walk-throughs, (110+), myself this past year. Thanks to the training I received from TBC, I was able to spend many hours in classrooms and in productive coaching conversations with staff members every week. Our school, overwhelmingly populated by economically disadvantaged students, received state recognition for programs implemented as a direct result of my coaching from the classroom level, rather than from behind my desk.

– Lisa Kersh, Principal, Plainview High School, Plainview, TX
acted in 2009, requires practices, assessments, and graduation and completion plans from all “priority” and “high priority” school districts, defined as those struggling with graduation and dropout rates.

Because the work on this law occurred at the same time that the Colorado Graduates Initiative (CGI) was providing technical assistance to several school districts, there were opportunities to translate some of the districts’ important work into state-level policy action. Some of the ways that the law meshed with CGI’s work were:

1. Coordination with a wide range of stakeholders from various systems, including juvenile justice, child welfare, workforce development, mental health, and family support;
2. Coordination of various funding streams to maximize their effects on student outcomes;
3. Establishment of a specific state office of dropout prevention and student re-engagement to focus efforts; and
4. Concentration on the dropout prevention indicators of attendance, behavior problems, and course failure.

The CCC and the National Center for School Engagement have followed a “state house to school house” policy, seeking to align state policies to local practices and to take into account policies at the school and district levels that tend to push students out of school.

The state’s annual dropout rate (based on all students in grades 7 through 12) has already declined from 4.4% in 2007 to 3.6% in 2009.

**STAKEHOLDER COMMITMENT**

CGI’s collaborative process involved mutual commitment to a “cycle of inquiry” in an ongoing learning community. This cyclical approach required regular collection and analysis of data to understand the early warning signals of dropping out, the extent to which students were manifesting these early warning signals, how schools were responding, and the relative effectiveness of the school measures. This data-driven process helped inform stakeholders about necessary changes. The openness and willingness of districts to discuss their data in a wider learning community was a crucial component of this collaborative effort.

The cycle of inquiry also informed policy making, as the CCC and other groups used data-based findings to persuade legislators and other state policy makers to adjust state policies in ways that would support dropout prevention and recovery efforts. And as stakeholders themselves participate in this perpetual cycle of inquiry in their own learning communities, they become increasingly aware of how to help transform schools into the learning communities that will keep students engaged.

**CONCLUSION**

The Colorado Graduates Initiative provides a model for other states to follow as they seek to address their own dropout problems. While this collaborative effort is still a work in progress, it’s already yielded important lessons, as well as encouraging early results. The state’s annual dropout rate (based on all students in grades 7 through 12) has already declined from 4.4% in 2007 to 3.6% in 2009, and we expect that the cohort graduation rates, as they become available, will show notable improvement over the next several years.

**REFERENCE**
