A Pocket Guide for Preventing Future High School Dropouts
The National Education Association is the nation’s largest professional employee organization, representing 3.2 million elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, education support professionals, school administrators, retired teachers, and students preparing to become teachers.

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There is a dropout crisis in America. Far too many students fail to earn a high school diploma, especially many ethnic-minority and low-income students in certain communities, school districts, and schools. But the crisis can be solved. This pocket guide outlines many of the most effective solutions. Adapted from an action guide for NEA state and local affiliates, the pocket guide is a resource for anyone who shares our goal of preventing future high school dropouts.

Students drop out of high school for a variety of reasons. Some are related to their experiences in school; some are not. This means that schools and educators alone cannot solve the dropout crisis. Solutions must be forged by a broad spectrum of those who care enough to take action, including NEA members and other educators, school board members, mayors, governors, legislators, parents, health and social service organizations, philanthropies, youth advocates, and business leaders. We invite you to work with us to take the following actions.
1. **Build strong personal relationships at school between students and adults.**
   - Reorganize schools to create small learning communities for students and teachers.
   - Create caring, long-term, individual relationships between students and adults in the school so that each student has an adult they can turn to and rely on.
   - Use advisory, advocacy, and counseling systems to meet students’ academic and personal needs.
   - Make strong and effective connections with students’ families through regular communication, school and community events, and home visits.

2. **Champion higher graduation rates among English Language Learners.**
   - Provide incentives to recruit and retain teachers who are specifically trained and credentialed to teach English Language Learners.
   - Make sure that students have adequate instructional materials in English and in their primary languages.
   - Hold policymakers accountable for funding the development of assessments that are appropriate for English Language Learners.
   - Make sure educators receive the professional support and training they need to help English Language Learners be successful.
   - Ensure that English Language Learners receive an education that fosters both English proficiency and academic performance so they can compete successfully in higher education, job and career training, and the workplace.
3. Create an early warning system to identify students at risk of dropping out.
   - Make sure schools use data on student attendance, behavior, and academic performance to identify students who are at greater risk of dropping out.
   - Argue that data monitoring should begin in the upper elementary grades.
   - Urge schools to monitor students’ sense of belonging and engagement in school.
   - Pay close attention to students who have been retained within grade level, including retention in elementary and middle school.
   - Solve the problems identified by an early warning system as they occur.

4. Do not let students fall behind and fail academically.
   - Let others know that academic failure is often a major reason students drop out.
   - Increase instructional time in core subjects during the school day.
   - Reduce class size in all grades, including middle and high school.
   - Create small learning communities in secondary schools through grade-level academies and/or schools within schools.
   - Provide one-on-one tutoring and intense support before school, after school, in the evenings (high school students), in summer school, and in the first quarter of each school year.
   - Provide extra courses in core subjects for students who need to catch up academically.
   - Encourage districts to offer credit recovery programs to students who have too few credits to graduate.
   - Give students who need extra time five years to graduate.
   - Provide time for teachers to collaborate on how to best help students who are struggling academically.
Make sure schools are staffed by skilled and knowledgeable teachers who are experts in what they teach and in how to teach.

5. Focus on reducing high dropout rates among minority boys.
   - Recruit and retain minority male teachers at all levels, especially in elementary school.
   - Encourage male community members of color to serve as mentors for minority male students.
   - Partner with state and local organizations that are working to improve the educational outcomes of minority males.
   - Change policies and procedures that contribute to disproportionate placement of minority boys in special education.

6. Implement interventions that actually increase graduation rates.
   - Examine the strategies and programs that have been reviewed by various organizations, such as the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy (www.evidencebasedprograms.org/static), Communities in Schools (www.cisnet.org/about), the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (www.dropoutprevention.org/ndpcdefault.htm), the Promising Practices Network (www.promisingpractices.net), and the What Works Clearinghouse (ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc).
   - Look for evidence that strategies and programs have been effective with students like yours.
   - See if the developer, or some other agency, provides on-site technical assistance and training to support implementation.
   - Implement strategies and programs as the developers intended, and document variations in implementation. They may affect expected outcomes.
   - Collect outcome information about the effectiveness of strategies and programs in your setting.

4 www.nea.org/home/DropoutPrevention.html
7. Improve the lives of low-income students and their families.
   ▶ Advocate for increases to the minimum wage.
   ▶ Champion changes that enable workers to seek and obtain collective bargaining rights.
   ▶ Support an expanded earned income tax credit for low-income working families.
   ▶ Work for affordable and adequate housing.
   ▶ Advocate for adequate health care for all students and their families.
   ▶ Demand high-quality early childhood education for all children.
   ▶ Reduce the rate of low birth-weight babies.
   ▶ Reduce drug and alcohol abuse in students’ neighborhoods.
   ▶ Insure that students and their families have enough to eat.
   ▶ Reduce rates of family violence.
   ▶ Improve access to mental health services.

8. Make sure students make successful transitions at key points in their schooling.
   ▶ Make sure all students are at grade level in reading and math by the end of second grade, and retain grade-level or higher achievement throughout elementary school.
   ▶ Help students be successful in middle school by keeping daily attendance high, focusing on academics, and addressing behavior issues as they arise.
   ▶ Work for on-time promotion from grade-to-grade with extra support for students who need to catch up with their peers.
Collect information from students who do not complete high school about why they dropped out to inform future prevention efforts.

Monitor the effects of high-stakes testing on dropout rates, including high school exit exams.

9. **Offer students options for how they prepare for college and the job market.**
   
   - Offer students career and technical education as well as a college preparatory curriculum.
   
   - Partner with higher education so students can take college courses while they are in high school.
   
   - Provide community-based, service-learning, and work-related opportunities that help students see the relevance of what they learn in school to their lives and interests outside school.
   
   - Offer students effective alternative programs within schools and the option of attending alternative schools.

10. **Promote increased federal funding to support dropout prevention.**
    
    - Call on Congress and the president to invest federal dollars over the next 10 years to support dropout prevention.
    
    - Champion full funding for Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
    
    - Advocate for federal, state, and local partnerships to transform schools that produce high numbers of dropouts.

11. **Recognize that preventing future dropouts often requires community-wide action.**
    
    - Build the collective will to take action through community-wide conversations, coalitions, partnerships, and dropout prevention summits that pull together everyone who is concerned about dropout rates.
    
    - Intervene in schools that have higher than acceptable dropout rates through effective, coordinated efforts that involve the school and the community.

6  www.nea.org/home/DropoutPrevention.html
Recognize that improving graduation rates at these schools may well involve community development and school transformation.

Reach out to stakeholders who will benefit from dropout reduction, including groups interested in educational excellence, economic growth, youth development, and crime reduction.

Involve local institutions that bear the costs of high dropout rates including businesses, civic groups, law enforcement, health care, social services, and neighborhood organizations.

12. **Review grade level retention policies.**
   - Let others know that dropouts are significantly more likely than high school graduates to have been retained, especially more than once.
   - Identify how decisions to retain students are made.
   - Identify students who are likely to be retained early in the school year so interventions to prevent retention can be implemented.
   - Advocate for policies that promote students to the next grade and provide intense support so they catch up academically.

13. **Strive for 100 percent daily school attendance by all students.**
   - Help others understand that frequent absence from school is a significant predictor of dropping out.
   - See that well thought-out attendance policies are in place and are enforced.
   - Encourage schools to hire an attendance monitor or coordinator.
   - Contact students’ homes after one or two absences.
Make sure schools are safe learning environments for all students, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students.

Find out why students are absent and address root causes.

Examine suspension and expulsion policies to see if they are contributing to increased absences.

14. Support students who are homeless or who are in foster care so they graduate.

- Assign an adult advocate for each student.
- Allow students to remain in their school of origin, when feasible.
- Make sure students who relocate to a new school, and those awaiting foster care placement, receive educational services immediately.
- Monitor the engagement and academic progress of older homeless students who may not reside with their families, including runaway students and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students.

15. Work to end low-income students’ isolation in racially and linguistically segregated schools.

- Create schools that are racially, ethnically, and economically balanced.
- Make sure public school choice programs (e.g., charter and magnet schools, student transfer programs) promote student integration.

The content of this pocket guide is adapted from Preventing Future High School Dropouts: An Advocacy and Action Guide for NEA State and Local Affiliates, which is available at www.nea.org/home/ns/20332.htm. The pocket guide also draws from the work of Robert Balfanz, Center for the Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University; David Berliner, Arizona State University; John Bridgeland, Civic Enterprises; Gary Orfield, Civil Rights Project, UCLA; and Richard Rothstein, Economic Policy Institute.

NEA’s Dropout Prevention Web site:
www.nea.org/home/DropoutPrevention.html