

A Systemic Approach Is Key to Dropout Prevention

by David Flowers, Ph.D.

The Board of Education in Fargo, North Dakota (11,200 students) developed a strategic plan comprised of seven “results” that we want for all learners when they exit our system. The Board’s strategic plan calls for over 95% of students to graduate with the knowledge, skills, and behaviors embodied in the plan. Our group of students who present a challenge in meeting the goal are the 15-17% of students who drop out, in spite of our having had an alternative school for many years.

What might explain this, in a district whose overall achievement is exemplary by many state and national standards? To answer that question we sought the help of the National Dropout Prevention Center.

In my charge to the Center team, I said, “I hope what we learn through this process, institutionally, is that there are things that the system can and must do to meet the needs of the children we serve rather than the children we are serving having to fit a system that is so narrowly constructed that it cannot respond to their needs.”

The report issued by the Center following their visit consisted of many recommendations which confirmed the need for a comprehensive, systemic approach. Subsequently we have initiated or planned many efforts, samples of which follow, and which illustrate the comprehensive nature of our approach to dropout prevention.

- ◆ Surveys and focus groups with students indicate that many students are not engaged by the relatively traditional “stand and deliver” instruction that the Center team observed. In the fall, we are bringing Phillip Schlechty, author of *Working on the Work*, to the district to work with the entire K-12 faculty on student engagement.
 - ◆ A high school leadership team comprised of administrators and teachers will envision a new high school paradigm when we transition from 10-12 to 9-12 schools in two years. The team will go to a Richard DuFour “Learning Communities” institute this summer, and such an institute will be offered in Fargo next summer. A possible outcome will be a different approach to ninth grade, with smaller teams and a variety of supports in place for all students.
 - ◆ We have implemented all-day kindergarten in those schools most impacted by poverty, with intention to do so later in all schools as funding is secured.
 - ◆ New comprehensive assessments in reading at the primary level will enable us to diagnose individual students’ reading difficulties. (A strategic goal is for all students to read proficiently by grade three.)
 - ◆ Reading Recovery has been implemented in all schools in first grade.
 - ◆ An alternative middle school team of two multidiscipline-trained teachers will offer a team setting for identified at-risk students for the first time next year in our middle schools.
 - ◆ We are working with a community task force on the issue of
- ◆ We appointed a new alternative school principal and empowered her to create a task force to make recommendations regarding changes in the existing alternative school program, new alternatives at all levels, and other dropout prevention strategies.

alcohol/substance abuse, and a task force working to design our new middle school curriculum has recommended that students have health and physical education every year in middle school to address the issue.

It is simply impossible to view dropout prevention as a narrow issue affecting a minority of our students for whom an alternative program is viewed as the solution. One risk of relying too narrowly on alternative programs is that even the most effective such program may, in a sense, allow the rest of the system to abdicate responsibility for students who do not “fit.” A systemic approach acknowledges that while alternatives that take students out of the system may be necessary, they should never be considered sufficient. Helping everyone own a piece of dropout prevention will help us better to serve not only our most at-risk students, but every child in the system.

—David Flowers is Superintendent of Fargo Public Schools.

