EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF POTENTIAL DROPOUTS
PERSPECTIVES OF PRIME 6 PRINCIPALS

WHAT CAN BE DONE
EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF POTENTIAL DROPOUTS:
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ABOUT THE CONSULTING TEAM

Robert L. Green, Ph.D., Dean and Professor Emeritus and Distinguished Alumnus, Michigan State University, is a Clark County School District consultant. He is the director of the consulting team that gathered and analyzed contributions from Prime Six schools elementary principals to produce this report. Dr. Green is the author of many books and reports on urban education issues – “Expectations” and “The American Dilemma and Challenge” among them. Over the past 30 years, he has provided consulting services to more than 25 school districts. During that period, he also created staff development strategies for teachers and administrators. In addition, he produced research and initiatives to reform schools, close the achievement gap and improve graduation rates.

George White, M.A., a communications consultant, provided writing and editing services for the Prime Six Schools Consulting Team. He has helped manage communications institutes at UCLA and the University of Southern California, directed a media-community engagement program funded by the Ford Foundation and developed strategies to promote initiatives related to health and early childhood development on behalf of The California Wellness Foundation and The Annie E. Casey Foundation. In addition, he edited research that explored ways to improve the education, health and life prospects of young men of color and wrote “A Way Out,” a public policy solutions report published by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank the nine Clark County District elementary school principals who made this report possible. They responded to a survey designed by the Robert L. Green Associates consulting team to garner the best practice approaches to addressing the early age factors that prompt students to drop out of school during their high school years. Collectively, they provided innovative solutions to the challenging educational issues that affect student achievement.

Associates team members, communications consultant George White and Dr. Theodore Ransaw, helped me select and analyze the best practices. George White also provided writing and editing assistance.

I also appreciate the support of Associate Superintendent Dr. Andre Denson and Dr. Beverly Mathis, a former district school principal who serves as a consultant to the school district. They helped me engage and involve the nine principals who provided the best practices.

In addition, I want to thank Superintendent Dwight Jones and his staff. Superintendent Jones engaged me as a consultant to advise Prime Six principals, identify barriers to higher student achievement and develop a plan to address the early factors that create academic difficulties that eventually prompt students to drop out of school.
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Executive Summary

This report is based on a trail-blazing knowledge-sharing project designed to reduce the high dropout rate in the Clark County School District. It is a study based on a survey that empowers elementary school principals to share the best approaches to addressing the early warning signs that indicate that a student could later drop out of school.

The director of this study identified these early warning signs after decades of research and classroom observations in Las Vegas and more than 25 other school districts. His research team aggregated and listed those indicators in a survey form that solicited responses from nine Clark County School District elementary school principals on how to address early-age determinants of potential dropouts. This report is a collection of their best responses – individual school practices that have been pooled to provide a guide to possible district-wide initiatives that could help improve graduation rates.

These “best practice” responses were provided by elementary school principals at West Las Vegas schools, administrators who are on the front lines of the battle for academic achievement in Clark County. These schools have some of the poorest and most segregated student populations and have been the most academically challenged in the district. Historically, some of the students from these schools have later dropped out of school.

After desegregation bussing plans in the 1970s were dropped in favor of district initiatives that purportedly invested more heavily in the Prime Six region, a 2009 UCLA report commissioned by the school district found that student achievement in those schools still lagged behind the district’s average.

By supporting this study, the Clark County School District has created a new approach to engendering academic achievement in its most challenged region. It acknowledges that collectively, nine school principals know more than any individual principal. This report advances the notion that knowledge sharing is an effective way to address urban education issues, an approach that is beginning to gain support.

The early warning signs and the Prime Six principals’ responses to those determinants can be grouped into the following categories: academic performance, student and parent participation and involvement, home and neighborhood environment, difficult behavior and discipline, dangerous and negative motivators, poverty, grade failure and expectations.

The principals have provided information on their responses to warning signs at their schools. These are initiatives that have engaged parents, addressed high-impact factors such as poverty and hunger, created school-wide standards of behavior, raised academic expectations and helped students become knowledge-sharing leaders for their younger peers.

Collectively, they have provided a pool of knowledge that can augment the district’s other initiatives to make Clark County one of the nation’s leading urban school districts.
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**Introduction and Background**

**The Diploma-Dropout Divide in Clark County**

This report is based on a unique knowledge-sharing project designed to reduce the high dropout rate in the Clark County School District. The current leadership team recently learned that the graduation rates reported by the previous administration were inflated. The dropout rates in the district are actually among the highest in the nation.

To address this problem, we created a project that enables school administrators to share the best approaches to addressing failure factors in early childhood education.

**Background on the Early Warning Signs**

After decades of research and classroom observations, Robert L. Green identified early warning signs that indicate a student could become a dropout during his or her high school years. Green identified and referenced 18 early warning indicators in different sections of some of his books – most recently in “The American Dilemma and Challenge: The African American Male Dropout Rate.”

The research team aggregated and listed those indicators in a survey form designed to solicit responses from nine Clark County School District elementary school principals on how to address early-age determinants that later prompt students to drop out of school. This report is based on the best of their responses.

**The Survey Sample: The Prime Six Schools**

When this project was conceived, the team leader decided to engage the elementary school principals in West Las Vegas schools with the poorest student populations. These schools have been the most academically challenged early education venues in the Clark County School District for decades.

**The Prime Six Schools Challenge – A Brief History**

This report focuses on the Prime Six region. The nine elementary schools in this region are Booker, Carson, Fitzgerald, Gilbert, Hoggard, Kelly, Mackey, McCall and Williams. The schools have high minority populations and are in the economically disadvantaged neighborhood of West Las Vegas.

In 1970s, the Prime Six schools were placed in a federally mandated consent decree desegregation program. Black students were bused out of their neighborhoods from first grade to fifth grade to attend schools in outlying predominantly white areas to promote racial diversity and educational equity. White students were bussed at the 6th grade level to what was known as “Sixth Grade Centers.”

However, after West Las Vegas residents complained that black students deserved the same opportunities as their white peers to attend quality schools close to home, the Clark County School District (CCSD) began dismantling the desegregation program in the early 1990s in favor of the “Prime Six” plan, which gave students at West Las Vegas elementary schools the option to be bused to other...
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schools, stay at their neighborhood schools or attend a purportedly racially desegregated “Sixth Grade Center” with “quality” education programs – hence the term “Prime Six.”

For nearly 20 years, the district purported that the Prime Six schools were given additional resources: more funds per student for instruction, longer school days, additional staffing and student enrichment such as field trips and enhanced summer programs. Performance in some Prime Six schools improved but a 2009 UCLA report commissioned by the school district found that student achievement in Prime Six schools still lagged behind the district’s average.

Distinguished UCLA sociologist, Professor Gary Orfield, was the supervisor of that report. He explains why it has been difficult to raise performance at Prime Six schools to the Carson County School District average in this excerpt from the study:

“Across the country, there are a handful of remarkable schools that manage to produce high achievement in the face of all the problems of intense, isolated and persistent poverty. But the vast majority of such schools perform poorly because the children come to kindergarten far behind, many are lacking basic essentials at home, health care is inadequate, the families often face involuntary moves or even homelessness, and experienced teachers typically leave such schools, which are often threatened by state and federal sanctions.”

Indeed, these are some of the socio-economic factors that have an early impact on the academic performance of children from poor families, circumstances that makes it likely that some of these students will later drop out of school. This study, based on the insight of principals, will help us address these and other factors.

The Value of Knowledge Sharing

Some of the district’s high school dropouts formerly attended Prime Six schools. The district asked Green to address this problem. He concluded that principals at each of the Prime Six schools have some insight regarding effective approaches for addressing some of the early warning signs of academic failure. By asking principals at all nine schools to provide responses on all 18 of the indicators, we believe we have obtained a pool of knowledge that will provide best practices. Collectively, nine principals know more than any individual principal. This notion of knowledge sharing is supported by institutions such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and is a cutting-edge approach to addressing urban education issues. Websites on the value of digital technology in education have also included references to the potential of knowledge sharing.
The Early Warning Signs and Best Practices Responses

The Early Warning Signs

Most early warning signs can be identified and addressed in schools – the following among them:

- Difficult behavior
- Academic Deficiencies
- Attendance problems
- Retention (not promoted)
- Feelings that some teachers or staff members have rejected him or her
- Failing grades in core courses
- Suspensions and expulsions
- Low rates of participation in school activities
- Low esteem and low expectations
- Poor personal hygiene
- Third grades student can’t read at first grade level
- Referral to child protective services
- Lack of parental involvement

Other indicators, while equally important, are factors that educators and school administrators rarely address successfully. They include the following:

- Poverty and challenging home lives
- Money as a motivator – a need to earn money
- Gang affiliations and/or interest in gangs
- Single-parent homes
- Environmental issues – living in deteriorating neighborhoods

The following is a summary of best practice responses from Prime Six elementary school principals
Addressing Early Warning Sign Indicators: Best Practices at Prime Six Schools

Poverty and challenging home lives

- **Address Hunger**: Maintain a food pantry in school; help qualified families complete and submit the Free and Reduced Lunch application to ensure that students receive breakfast and lunch at school; offer food backpacks on Friday to needy children so that they do not go hungry over the weekend; encourage parents to enroll in parenting classes

- **Address Health Issues**: Involve the school nurse in health screening programs; provide parents (in need) with Medicaid and Nevada Check-Up applications to ensure children get assessments and/or treatment; identify partners who can provide on-campus dental and eye screenings and referrals and encourage parents to participate in other free community health programs

- **Create an On-Campus Poverty Services Venue**: Host a Family Needs Day that gives parents an opportunity to meet with representatives from welfare departments, safety-net providers, job-training agencies and other community-based and faith-based organizations

Single-parent homes

- When necessary or requested, provide students access to mentors by, for example, working with programs such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters and other volunteer agencies

- If a single parent works during the evening, determine if there is an evening care-giver to ensure that children are not left alone and establish a relationship with care-giver in the event that an after-school contact is needed

- Ensure that the school counselor is engaged with any students in need and have the counselor form weekly peer group meetings with students experiencing distress as a result of a divorce or domestic turmoil

Money as a motivator – a need to earn money

- Determine if student has specific needs such as food or clothing and find resources to meet the needs

- Acknowledge the short-term value of money but stress the connection between education, good jobs and long-term high-income prospects by organizing Career Days that feature speakers who focus on achievement and the importance of staying in school

- Recruit successful role models who can speak to classes on a periodic basis about education and other appropriate ways to make money and achieve success
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Feelings that some teachers or staff members have rejected him or her

- Ensure that students are aware that the school administrators and counselor have an open-door policy to discuss any concerns that are school-related.
- Encourage students to speak freely at any meetings with a counselor, address any real or perceived problems and follow up later to confirm that any identified problems have been addressed.
- The counselor and teachers should stress that they have high regard for the student and that they also have high expectations for their personal and academic success.

Difficult behavior

- Identify the root cause by holding discussions with the student and parents before developing a plan to address the behaviors of concern.
- Create a school-wide behavior expectations document and ensure that students, parents and staff understand the rules in the classroom and common areas such as hallways, lunchrooms, playgrounds etc. and also provide teachers and staff with a standardized form for reporting problems.
- Consider forming a committee of older students leaders who can explain school rules at a forum for younger students (K through-2nd grade).

Academic deficiencies

- Response to Instruction Team (RTI) should create a more intensive instructional plan for students who are not progressing and track student progress after the intervention.
- Inform parents of the academic deficiencies and arrange for any necessary after-school tutoring, Saturday school or summer school instruction.
- If student does not progress after intensive instruction and/or tutoring and extra schooling, consider forming a multidisciplinary team that can provide a range of screenings and tests designed to seek strategies to overcome specific barriers to learning.

Attendance problems (absenteeism)

- Consider using the ParentLink grade-and-attendance monitoring system for parents and use its automated call system to contact parents after each absence.
- Establish a policy relating to frequency on when parents will be contacted by phone regarding absenteeism to establish an initial problem threshold of either one day, two days or three days.
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- Arrange a home visit with the parents if the problem is not resolved after initial threshold contact and also send follow-up letters to parents

Retention (not promoted)

- Provide a variety of tutoring and testing services for students who are on a path to failing
- Arrange discussions with parents of failure-bound students six months before the school year to get more home support for study activities
- If a student is not promoted, a plan should be developed to ensure success during the retention year and the student and parents should be informed that this is an opportunity to address problems and ensure longer term academic success

Failing grades in core courses

- Determine the cause(s) of deficiencies: absenteeism, failure to complete assignments, behavior problems, concentration problems and develop a plan to improve performance
- If necessary, contact parents and provide after-school tutoring
- Consider a home-engagement documentation process that requires that parents of failing students in Grades 3-5 receive and sign academic agenda forms with a list of classroom and homework assignments

Suspensions and expulsions

- Disseminate the Clark County School District’s guide to “Behaving Positive at School” to teachers, staff and to parents of students at-risk of suspension or expulsion to ensure that all are aware of the offenses that might prompt action
- Work with parents to develop a plan to address underlying problems that are creating circumstances that could lead to suspension and create follow-up plans to correct behavior for those returning from suspension
- Arrange meetings with parents when school begins to apply the progressive discipline outlined in the “Behaving Positive” guide

Referrals to child protective services:

- The school counselor should train all staff on the state’s “mandatory reporting” statute
- Staff should also inform the school administration when it reports possible abuse to the police and/or Child Protective Services (CPS)
- School counselor and school staff should monitor for signs of continuing abuse when student returns to school after police or CPS intervention
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Low rates of participation in school activities

- Allow students to form student councils, groups that can advise the teacher and/or administration on the kinds of activities they would like the school to offer
- Secure partners who can help provide new school activity events and programs
- To boost student participation, encourage parents and guardians/care-givers to engage in school activities

Low esteem and low expectations

- Arrange sessions with the school counselor to discuss possible feelings of loneliness, rejection or low self-esteem
- Teachers and school counselor should communicate that they have high expectations and confidence in the student and encourage him/her to set goals for the future
- If necessary, arrange family counseling sessions by outside agencies on a referral basis

Gang affiliations and/or interest in gangs

- Provide training to staff to enable them to identify signs of gang affiliation or gang affinity among students
- Invite the police department to provide its anti-gang G.R.E.A.T. program services at the school for 4th and 5th graders
- Confer with parents and give the gang-affiliated or those with gang affinities exposure to other group options such as the Boy/Girl Scouts or school-based clubs

Environmental issues – living in deteriorating neighborhoods

- Teachers/staff should periodically visit students’ homes and neighborhood to identify any issues related to community degradation and safety to understand the environmental conditions
- Pay close attention and record signals and indicators from students such complaints and student chats regarding community degradation and safety and environmental issues
- Create a Community Day fair at the school for parents and invite representatives from local government and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to set up booths to gather information on community development needs and record and relay complaints to appropriate local agencies
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Poor personal hygiene and/or dirty clothing

- Teacher or administration should have a one-on-one talk with the student (if old enough) or the parents to determine the cause and offer assistance
- The school should have a network of organizations that can provide clothing and toiletries for students in need
- The school should provide clothing, hygiene assistance, hygiene counseling when needed

Lack of parental involvement

- Ask parents what they need or want the school to provide
- Via flyers, letters and school bulletin boards, inform parents what is needed from them to make their students and their school more successful
- Organize parent-engagement events with incentives such as free meals, raffles, school tours and lectures on academic achievement initiatives to encourage parental involvement
- Teachers and/or the counselor should have a one-on-one talk with the higher grade students and/or the parents to determine the cause of non-involvement and offer assistance

Third grade students who cannot read at grade level

- Weekly progress monitoring is conducted on students who read two levels below grade levels and bi-weekly assessments for students who are reading one year below grade levels to determine progress and adjust instruction accordingly
- When monitoring and assessments are made, organize extra tutoring and any Saturday school or Summer School instruction or special education testing
- If there is a need, arrange for students to enroll in programs with literacy and learning strategists

The Value of the Best Practices Responses: An Analysis
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Analysis Overview

The early warning signs and the Prime Six principals’ responses to those determinants can be grouped into the following categories: academic performance, student and parent participation and involvement, home and neighborhood environment, difficult behavior and discipline, dangerous and negative motivators, poverty, grade failure and expectations.

The consulting team recognizes that one of the most important innovations, a measure proposed by Superintendent Dwight Jones, has already been adopted by the district. The superintendent’s initiative is designed to improve student achievement by providing more resources to low-performing schools and by holding educators more accountable for student achievement. It includes a restructuring plan for all, a new teacher evaluation system and creates goals and benchmarks for the district.

Also, the district is adopting the Nevada Growth Model of Achievement, which requires educators to track and monitor academic progress over time, instead of only using standardized pass-fail tests for evaluations.

The consulting team believes that the best practices highlights and proposals in this section will also help the district improve the graduation rates and produce graduates who are prepared for the future.

Analysis

In their responses, the nine principals provided excellent examples of practices that can be used to address the early warning sign indicators. In this section, the consulting team: 1) cites and/or comments on the importance of some of the most important indicators and/or warning signs responses 2) elaborates on the value of some responses and 3) expands on some responses with additional ideas or proposed innovations.

The comments, elaborations and expansions are based on research and analysis by the consulting team and the senior author’s extensive observations in Clark County District schools.

Academic Performance

Academic Deficiencies: An expansion

If student does not progress after intensive instruction and/or tutoring and extra schooling, consider forming a multidisciplinary team that can provide a range of screenings.

This practice can be amended by using the “screenings” or tests to develop a measurable program of action.

Failing grades in core courses: An elaboration
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If necessary, contact parents and provide after-school tutoring.

Qualified community volunteers could help provide that after-school tutoring.

Third grade students who cannot read at grade level: A comment and expansion

This is a high-priority issue because very poor reading skills is the strongest single predictor of the kind of academic failure that later prompts students to drop out of school.

When a third grade student cannot read at a first grade level, the principal and staff must devote time and resources to raise their reading level. In addition, schools might consider involving parents when students begin school because research has shown that parent volunteers in Kindergarten can help raise reading test scores.

Student and Parent Participation and Involvement

Low rates of participation in school activities: An expansion

Provide these students with an opportunity for a successful academic experience by calling on them and posing a question that the students can answer. Also, praise these students when they give the correct response. This would enhance self-esteem.

Attendance problems – absenteeism: An elaboration

Arrange a home visit with the parents if the problem is not resolved after initial threshold contact and also send follow-up letters to parents.

Visits to the home should be made during the day when the children are in school because school representatives should avoid situations that might embarrass the parent(s) in front of the student or intimidate the child by making an ill-timed visit.

Lack of parental involvement: An expansion

In some cases, teachers may not have the skills necessary to successfully engage parents. When that is the case, training should be provided. Also, teachers should be provided with a bilingual surrogate if there is a parent-teacher language barrier.

Home and Neighborhood Environment

Referrals to child protective services: An expansion

At the beginning of the school year, teachers should encourage students to speak to the counselor or the principal if they believe they are being abused. Teachers should also explain that any student who experiences abuse at home will be protected if they inform school personnel of such circumstances.

Environmental issues – living in deteriorating neighborhoods: An expansion
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*Teachers/staff should periodically visit students’ homes and neighborhood to identify any issues related to community degradation and safety to understand the environmental conditions*

We propose that college students and university research professors be recruited to assess neighborhood conditions that might be detrimental to the health of students.

**Difficult Behavior and Discipline**

**Difficult behavior: A comment and an expansion**

*Create a school-wide behavior expectations document and ensure that students, parents and staff understand the rules in the classroom and common areas such as hallways, lunchrooms, playgrounds etc. and provide teachers and staff with a standardized form for reporting problems*

This is a practice that establishes school-wide behavior standards that can be applied in a fair and consistent way.

*Consider forming a committee of older student leaders who can explain school rules at a forum for younger students (K through 2nd grade)*

This is an exemplary knowledge-sharing initiative on the student level, a practice proposed as an expansion in the “expectations” portion in this section and referenced in the conclusion of this report.

**Suspensions and expulsions: A comment**

This is an important issue. If addressed successfully, there would be no need to send the students to alternative schools, where the focus is often on behavior modification instead of academic instruction.

**Dangerous Negative Motivators**

**Money as a motivator – a need to earn money: A comment**

**Gang affiliations and/or interest in gangs: A comment**

The best practice responses in these two categories are important because desperation for money and gang affinity can lead to crime and incarceration. This is a crucial issue in African-American and Latino communities because people of color are jailed disproportionately partly because of the “school to prison” pipeline.

**Poverty: A Root Cause of Poor Academic Performance**

**Poverty and challenging home lives: A comment**
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Create an On-Campus Poverty Services Venue: Host a Family Needs Day that gives parents an opportunity to meet with representatives from welfare departments, safety-net providers, job-training agencies and other community-based and faith-based organizations

This is an innovative and valuable practice because it can help ensure that parents are paired with organizations that can address their specific problems.

Grade Failure

Retention (not promoted): A comment

If a student is not promoted, a plan should be developed to ensure success during the retention year and the student and parents should be informed that this is an opportunity to address problems and ensure longer term academic success

Retention is one of the strongest indicators that a student may eventually drop out of school. If a student is not promoted, extra measures must be taken to ensure that he or she gets the attention necessary to progress academically. The measures should include a plan designed enable the student to catch up with his or her age peers. If possible, students should not be retained more than once because it hurts self-esteem and could create discipline problems.

Expectations: A Key to Success

Low esteem and low expectations: An Expansion

Arrange sessions with the school counselor

Teachers and school counselor should communicate that they have high expectations and confidence in the student and encourage him/her to set goals for the future

If necessary, arrange family counseling sessions by outside agencies on a referral basis

One of the best practices on discipline involves forming a committee of older students to explain school rules at a forum for younger students.

This approach can be applied to address the expectations issue. Consider creating a school forum featuring a committee of “honor roll” older student leaders who started slow with low self-esteem and made great academic progress, students who can inspire and inform and mentor younger students (K through-2nd grade).
Conclusion and Proposed Next Steps

After inheriting one of the highest public school dropout rates in the nation, the administration of Superintendent Dwight Jones has launched initiatives that are improving the prospects for higher graduation rates.

About 6,500 seniors are at risk of not getting a high school diploma this year, according to new graduation projections. That is an improvement from the more than 10,000 at-risk students identified at the start of the year. With new mentor programs to help current high school students, the district is poised to improve short-term graduation rates.

Regarding elementary schools, where the seeds of eventual failure are often sown, the Prime Six principals have provided responses to warning signs at their schools. These initiatives have engaged parents, addressed high-impact factors such as poverty and hunger, created school-wide standards of behavior, raised academic expectations and helped students become knowledge-sharing leaders for their younger peers.

With this collection of impressive, innovative approaches to addressing the early warning sign factors that create dropout tendencies, the administration can create additional strategies that can help make the district a national role model for improving graduation rates.

Proposed Next Steps

- Promote knowledge sharing by circulating this report to elementary school principals district-wide
- Consider the creation of an action plan that calls for the adoption of specific best practices on a district-wide basis
- Adopt measures that also promote knowledge sharing among the students to address issues such as discipline and low self-esteem
- Consider conducting knowledge-sharing projects involving junior and high school principals
- Consider conducting knowledge-sharing projects involving teachers
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References


