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To cite this article: Marcia Davis , Liza Herzog & Nettie Legters (2013) Organizing Schools to Address Early Warning Indicators (EWIs): Common Practices and Challenges, Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), 18:1, 84-100, DOI: 10.1080/10824669.2013.745210

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2013.745210>



Published online: 05 Feb 2013.



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Organizing Schools to Address Early Warning Indicators (EWIs): Common Practices and Challenges

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An early warning system is an intentional process whereby school personnel collectively analyze student data to monitor students at risk of falling off track for graduation and to provide the interventions and resources to intervene. We studied the process of monitoring the early warning indicators and implementing interventions to ascertain common practices and challenges. Research questions focused on the process of collecting and reviewing student data, conducting team meetings, and designing or selecting, and following through on, student interventions. This article reports on typical practices and implementation challenges of early warning indicators meetings from 10 schools that participated in the pilot phase of the Diplomas Now School Transformation Model across the country, gathered through meeting observations and interviews.

The monumental decision to drop out of high school is made over years, mostly stemming from successes and failures prior to high school (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Fine, 1991; Orfield, 2004). Research from Johns Hopkins University and the Philadelphia Education Fund has revealed that it is possible to identify a substantial percentage of eventual dropouts as early as the sixth grade, using three indicators from student records data that are commonly kept by school districts (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Through an examination of sixth-grade student data regularly collected by school systems, “60% of the students who will not graduate from the school system within 1 year of expected graduation can be identified” (Balfanz et al., 2007, p. 229). Four sixth-grade characteristics, taken alone or in combination, are strong predictors of dropout: (a) receiving a final grade of F in English or literacy; (b) receiving a final grade of F in mathematics; (c) attending school less than 80% of the time; and (d) receiving a final behavior mark of unsatisfactory in one or more courses. Students in Philadelphia who had any one of these characteristics as sixth graders in 1997 had a 71% to 83%

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probability of not graduating from the school system within 15 months of their expected graduation date (Balfanz et al., 2007, p. 228).

Research in high schools reveals similar trends. Work from the Chicago Consortium on School Research identified key predictors of high school graduation among students at the end of the ninth grade (Allensworth & Easton, 2005, 2007). This research defined *on track* status at the end of ninth grade as earning enough credits to be promoted to the 10th grade and having no more than one semester F in a core course. Analysis of data from the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) showed that 22% of CPS students classified as off track at the end of ninth grade graduated from high school in 4 years, compared with 81% of their peers who were classified as on track. Moreover, the analysis showed that on-track status was a stronger predictor of high school graduation than test scores and demographic characteristics combined.

Often, the transition between elementary and middle school causes a decrease in academic motivation that leads to early disengagement in school. This decrease in motivation has been found in numerous studies (Wigfield et al., 1997). Compared to elementary schools, the middle school education environment is less personal, with fewer positive teacher and student relationships; provides more public evaluation of school work; and is more teacher directed with fewer opportunities for students to make decisions (Eccles et al., 1993; Guthrie & Davis, 2003). According to Eccles et al. (1993), the mismatch between the educational environment in middle schools and the increasing needs of early adolescents is exacerbating this decrease in motivation.

More specifically, the environmental changes often associated with transition to traditional middle grade schools are likely to be especially harmful since they emphasize competition, social comparison, and ability self-assessment at a time of heightened self-focus; they decrease decision making and choice at a time when the desire for autonomy is growing; they emphasize lower-level cognitive strategies at a time when the ability to use higher-level strategies is increasing; and they disrupt social networks and decrease the opportunity for close adult-child relationships to develop at a time when adolescents are especially concerned with peer relationships and may be in special need of close adult relationships outside of the home. (pp. 559–560)

Likewise, the transition from middle to high school can also lead to disengagement in school (Herlihy, 2007). By high school, it is estimated that between 40 and 60 percent of students chronically disengage from school, not counting those who have dropped out (Klem & Connell, 2004). The use of effective strategies such as providing additional help, linking to student interests, and forming important grade retention policies can be utilized to reengage students in school (Anderson et al., 2004).

EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

Over the past 5 years, use of school district administrative data to identify and monitor individual students who are disengaging from school and at high risk of dropping out has notably increased. An early warning system is a collaborative approach in which educators, administrators, parents, and communities use student data to keep track of students falling off the pathway to graduation and to provide the interventions and resources to intervene (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). The report, “On track for success: The use of Early

Warning Indicator and Intervention Systems to build a grad nation" (Bruce, Bridgeland, Fox, & Balfanz, 2011) covered the purpose, design, and potential of early warning systems. Early warning systems are based around indicators such as attendance, behavior, and course performance, and these early warning indicators help educators to identify students falling off the path to graduation and to decide on the most appropriate interventions. For early warning systems to be effective, according to the report, there needs to be a "commitment to success" from those involved in the process including those in the school, district, and state department of education, strong technical components to ensure accurate and timely access to student data, and maximized access to resources and human capital in order to implement effective interventions. (Bruce, Bridgeland, Fox, & Balfanz, 2011, p. 23).

The promise of these early warning systems is that they (a) use readily available, low-cost data to identify students who, absent intervention, are likely to drop out; (b) enable teachers and administrators to cut through the massive amounts of data they receive to focus on the most important indicators; (c) can be incorporated into real-time data systems to permit monitoring of student progress during the school year; and (d) allow districts to monitor how well schools are helping students to stay on track to graduation. Most important, these indicators can accurately identify students at high risk of dropping out years before they leave school, providing educators and administrators with time to intervene to get students back on track.

DIPLOMAS NOW

Programs such as the Diplomas Now School Transformation Model are implementing initiatives aimed at making the middle and high school environment more engaging, supportive, and effective for adolescents to increase graduation rates. Diplomas Now is a collaboration among three independent nonprofit organizations that work together to transform a school through an early warning system with tiered student supports, teacher teams and small learning communities, curriculum that closes the achievement gap, instructional practices that make the curriculum work, professional development that is grounded in the curriculum, and a can-do culture and climate (Balfanz, 2011; Balfanz, Mac Iver, & Davis, 2011; D. J. Mac Iver, Fradlin, Wang, & Mac Iver, 2011; M. A. Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009, 2010; M. A. Mac Iver, Mac Iver, & Wang, 2012; Talent Development Secondary Program, 2012). The first organization, Talent Development Secondary, is a school-reform model based out of Johns Hopkins University that provides evidence-based organizational, instructional, and professional development programs. The second partner, City Year, places young adults, or *near peers*, in a school to provide literacy and math tutoring, attendance and behavior coaching, and enrichment programming. The last partner, Communities in Schools, provides an on-site masters-level social worker for students and families requiring more intensive case-managed support such as clinical or social service supports.

Diplomas Now schools adopted a three-tiered model of school supports as a frame in which to assign interventions to students who are falling off track (see Figure 1). The first tier involves effective whole-school preventative measures and a school-reform model that improves instruction and performance. In urban districts that struggle with dropout, these whole-school measures should keep 70% to 80% of the students on track to graduation during the middle grades. The second tier of targeted interventions is for the 10% to 20% of students who require additional focused support. For example, a student who is still missing school despite a schoolwide attendance program might be required in the intervention to sign an attendance contract or have a

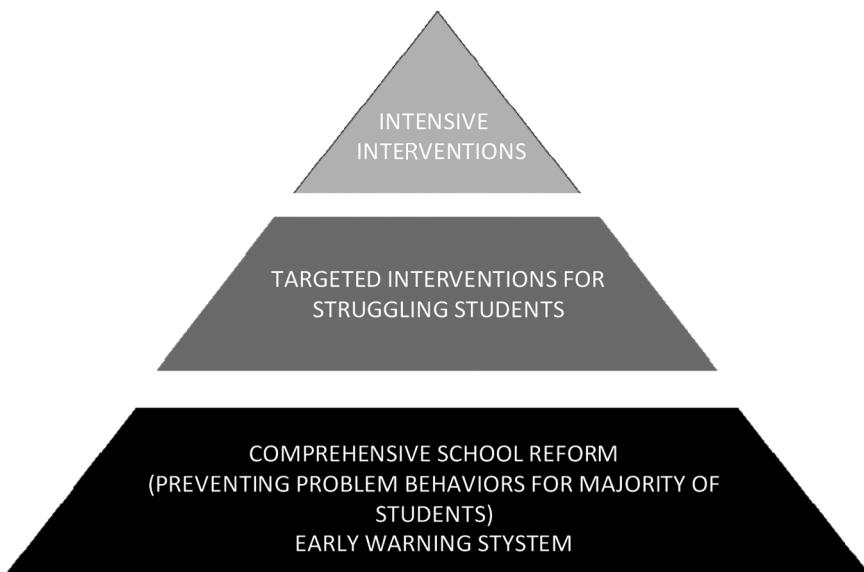


FIGURE 1 Tiered Intervention Model.

family conference and then receive a brief daily check-in from an adult (in this case, a City Year corps member) who checks on the student's attendance, expresses gladness at seeing the student, and calls home immediately if the student is not there. Finally, the third tier of intensive intervention (coordinated and/or provided by Communities in Schools) is reserved for the 5% to 10% of students in need of very small group or one-on-one supports.

During the 2006–2007 and 2007–2008 school years, Philadelphia pioneered the development and use of an early warning and intervention system that tasked interdisciplinary teams with targeting interventions for students in high-need middle schools and high schools with technical assistance provided by Johns Hopkins University (JHU) and the Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF). This pioneering work quickly revealed that there were insufficient human resources in these schools to provide the right intervention to the right student at the right time in a consistent manner, because of the hundreds of students at each school who needed targeted interventions and the 50 to 100 students at each school who needed intensive case-managed interventions. As a result, JHU and PEF, in 2008–2009, began a partnership with City Year and Communities in Schools to create Diplomas Now, a new secondary school transformation model that employs whole school reform and prevention efforts and a second shift of adults to make it possible for schools to provide support with the intensity, consistency, and scale required. After successfully piloting this model in multiple schools in multiple cities, Johns Hopkins University and its Diplomas Now partners received a highly competitive federal Investing in Innovation grant to validate the approach in a randomized field test in middle and high schools across the country, including Boston, Philadelphia, East Baton Rouge, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Antonio, Miami, Washington, DC, Detroit, Columbus, OH, and New York City.

Early reports have indicated that the Diplomas Now program is succeeding in keeping students on track for graduation. Philadelphia schools that piloted the Diplomas Now program in

2009–2010 showed a 50% decrease in attendance and behavior issues, and a 66% reduction in course failures (Balfanz, 2011). Diplomas Now pilot schools in New Orleans, Chicago, and Columbia, SC, showed similar improvements (Balfanz et al., 2011). An experimental validation study, led by MDRC and funded by the Investing in Innovation grant, is currently underway, in which results from more than 30 Diplomas Now schools will be compared to results from a similar number of control schools to formally assess the impact of the model on student outcomes (attendance, behavior, course failure or success, achievement, promotion, and graduation rates), as well as its effect on mediating variables such as students' engagement in school, their sense of whether their teachers care about them, the amount of effort they devote to school work, and the quality of their relationships at school.

EARLY WARNING INDICATOR TEAMS

The system for checking early warning indicator data, assigning interventions, and connecting with students is similar to that used by programs such as Check and Connect, a schoolwide attendance initiative reviewed by What Works Clearinghouse (What Works Clearinghouse, 2006). In Check and Connect, a monitor acts as a mentor and advocate to a caseload of students, monitoring data, targeting students for interventions, building relationships with both students and their families, and coordinating services (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003). By regularly examining data, the monitor can look for potential early warning indicators that show students slipping off the graduation track. By forming relationships with these students, the monitor can develop individual interventions for each student that may involve counseling, tutoring, or connecting the student with community resources. Unlike the Check and Connect model, however, Diplomas Now involves a team of adults who share the responsibility of a graduation monitor to review data, share information, determine and apply interventions, and form relationships with students.

The Early Warning Intervention (EWI) team in a Diplomas Now school is comprised of an interdisciplinary team of teachers who share a group of students, the Talent Development School Transformation Facilitator (STF), Communities in Schools site coordinator or social worker, and City Year Americorps members. Often these teams are joined by other school staff members, such as a principal or school counselor. Like the monitor in the Check and Connect model, the team reviews data and assigns interventions to students who are falling off track. Each team member shares information about his or her students at the team meeting and participates in the assignment of and follow-through on student interventions. The STF is in charge of gathering the data to present at the team meeting and usually acts as the facilitator.

With all the members on the team feeling responsible for the students' welfare and learning, students can form attachments to adults in their school in even more ways. Having a team caring and understanding about the students in the school makes it more likely that students will find someone to confide in and be provided guidance on how to improve their educational experiences. In addition, with the team meeting on a frequent basis, important information about the student can be shared with all team members for the team to understand the student and make allowances. Sharing is important, especially in cases where the student behaves differently depending on the teacher and subject. By meeting in a group, teachers can determine why the student behaves well in English class, but not in math. Perhaps his or her seat needs to be changed, or teachers can share techniques that have helped them with the particular student. Without this

group structure and shared meeting time, teachers often feel isolated in dealing with the difficult student. With Diplomas Now, it is not just the teachers who are meeting, but also members from the other organizations that have yet another perspective and information about the student. Such a team approach helps in understanding what interventions will be the most effective and how they can be applied across the student's classes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study focuses on school-based processes of monitoring early warning indicators and implementing interventions—key components of the Diplomas Now model. The inquiry pursued the following topics and research questions:

1. Data: What were common practices schools used to collect, organize, and review student data? What types of data were collected? Who collected the data? How was it organized and reported? What data-related challenges did staff encounter?
2. Meetings: What were common practices school teams encountered in conducting EWI meetings? How were meetings organized? Who facilitated? Who participated? Were protocols or other meeting technology used? What conditions promoted productive meetings? What challenges did staff encounter in establishing and sustaining EWI meetings?
3. Interventions: How did EWI teams design, identify, and follow through on interventions with students? What were common interventions? Who was assigned to carry them out? What practices supported follow through? What challenges did teams encounter in developing and implementing interventions?

METHOD

The data for this study were collected through qualitative observations and interviews in schools implementing EWI response teams. The research team analyzed all observation and interview data using a consensual qualitative research method using multiple-researcher review and discussion to secure reliability and descriptive and interpretive validity (Fielding & Lee, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1994).

Participants

Between March 2010 and May 2011, we visited 10 Diplomas Now pilot schools in seven cities, located throughout the United States. Three of the schools spanned elementary and middle grades, three were middle schools, and four were high schools. Enrollment at these schools ranged from 88 to 1,790 students, with minority status ranging from 90 to 100%, and free-reduced-price meal status ranging from 76 to 99%.

Each school was visited for 1 or 2 days depending on the scheduling of the team meetings. During these visits, 13 EWI meetings were observed and 75 interviews were held with administration, teachers, school transformation facilitators, City Year team leaders and corps members, CIS coordinators, and school counselors.

Observations and Interviews

Observations. Our research team sought to attend at least one EWI team meeting at each of the 10 schools, which we labeled A through J. At three of the schools, more than one meeting was observed. For school G, the meeting was cancelled on the day of the visit and therefore could not be observed. For nine of the 13 team meetings, only one team member observed, but there were two observers for three of the team meetings. For school J, simultaneous meetings were held, for which two team members observed two of the break-out sessions. The meetings lasted anywhere from 20 to 50 min and were held at various times during the day. During an observation, a running record was kept. Specifically, a team member wrote down who was at the meeting, meeting start and ending times, the setup of the room, the data presented to the team either on paper or displayed on a board, early warning indicator information shared with the team, and the interventions agreed upon.

Interview instrument. During a school visit, when team meetings were not being observed, the research team conducted interviews with teachers, the School Transformation Facilitators, CIS coordinators, CY Corp members, and other school staff, including members of the administration, school counselors, and school liaisons. The participants were asked questions regarding their experiences using early warning indicators. Seventy-five participants from the 10 schools were interviewed using the protocol in the appendix. Although most of the participants were interviewed individually, due to time constraints a handful of participants were interviewed as a group. The interviews lasted from 10 to 40 min. Teachers generally had less time allotted for the interview due to their tight teaching schedules.

RESULTS

Student Data

The first set of research questions asked about the typical practices and implementation challenges in collecting and reviewing student data. The process of gathering EWI data can be a challenge to an STF without a user-friendly and real-time data system. Gathering these data can take a great deal of time, especially if the school district does not have a way to easily pull up current data on every student. In some districts, an STF would have to wait 10 days for data, which, by then, might not be actionable. One STF mentioned that it can take up to an entire day just to prepare the data for an EWI meeting.

During our team meeting observations, teams generally examined the data of around six to seven students per team meeting. The list of students to be discussed, or focus students, was collectively put together by the STF, with CY and teacher feedback. When asked how students were selected to be included on the focus list, team members generally agreed that they examine the early warning indicators of attendance, behavior, and course performance for each student, along with other data such as test scores. Students with one or more of these indicators are considered for inclusion on the focus list, with priority given to students with two or more indicators. Students can also be added very quickly when a student suffers an acute crisis such as a death in the family.

The respondents agreed that they rarely, if ever, disagree on which students should be on the focus list. Challenges to focus list identification may occur briefly if a student selectively misbehaves, e.g., in one teacher's classroom, or when team members disagree on what may be causing the student to struggle. When broached at an EWI meeting, these issues seemed to be worked through quickly. Team members noted that the differences of behavior in classrooms for some students relates to the personalities of the students and teachers, as well as seat- and row-mates in class.

Teams found it difficult to define bad behavior; attaching meaning to behavior challenges can be subjective and unintuitive to measure. Some teams track in- and out-of-school suspensions; another team may look at referrals to the office or behavior marks issued by teachers at the close of each report period. Depending on the indicator selected, we saw wide variation in the numbers of students identified as having poor behavior. As one teacher said, "If we marked all bad behavior, we would have too many students on the focus list."

Teachers commented that severe behavior problems generally get the most attention. From our observations, we noticed that most of the conversation at EWI meetings is around behavior, especially that of students with anger issues, or who are fighting, acting out, or disruptive. Some team members felt that, in these situations, they have to redirect the conversation to students who do not usually get discussed because they do not have traditional behavior issues, but are doing poorly. Also, sometimes it is not how poorly students are behaving, but whether they have a complete change in behavior, that may be very telling. Teachers noted that if a student is acting out of character, perhaps being more withdrawn in class, it may signify that something major has occurred in her life.

EWI Team Meetings

The next set of research questions asked about typical practices and implementation challenges involved in team meetings. To answer these questions, a total of 13 teacher team meetings were observed. Table 1 details the time of the meeting, numbers of students discussed at each meeting, average amount of time allotted per discussion of each student, and the total meeting time. Of the 13 meetings, an average of 7.67 students was discussed at each meeting, with each discussion lasting for about 4.03 min each. Seven meetings were held in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three at the end of the school day.

In addition to observing the meetings, we asked questions in interviews about the meeting process. Table 2 details findings including average length of an EWI meeting in minutes, common and less common attendees, meeting facilitation, and presentation of student data. Two teams

TABLE 1
Data From Observations

	<i>A</i>	<i>B1</i>	<i>B2</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E1</i>	<i>E2</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>J1</i>	<i>J2</i>
Start time	9:50	10:33	8:02	8:32	3:15	11:24	12:15	7:57	10:44	8:15	2:24	2:24
Number of students	7	5	8	11	8	6	6	5	13	12	5	6
Average time per student	4.86	3.8	3.12	4.09	5.37	3.83	6.16	3.4	2.85	2.39	5.6	2.83
Total time	36	30	30	45	45	25	39	20	45	50	45	45

TABLE 2
Data From Interviews

	A	B	C	D1	D2	E	F	G	H	I	J
How Often	Weekly	Biweekly	Biweekly	Weekly	Biweekly	Biweekly	Weekly	Biweekly	Biweekly	Biweekly	Biweekly
How Long	40-45	30-60	35-60	30	45-60	30-50	15-20	40-50	30-50	45-60	45
Always Attend	TT, CY, CIS, STF	TT, STF, CIS, CY	TT, STF, CY, CIS	TT, STF, CY, CIS	TT, STF, CY, CIS	TT, CY, STF, CIS	TT, CY, STF, CIS	TT, CY, STF, CIS	TT, CY, STF, CIS	TT, CY, STF, CIS	TT, CY, STF, CIS
Sometimes Attends	SPT ET Parents	SC Admin Admin Liaison	SC Admin Admin Liaison	ESL ET	SC	SC, Admin	Admin	Admin	Admin	Admin	Admin
Who Facilitates	STF	STF	STF	Admin	Admin	STF	STF	STF	STF	STF	STF
How Data Presented	Elect	Paper	Paper	Elect	Elect	Paper	Elect	Elect	Paper	Paper	Paper

Notes. TT = team teachers. ET = elective teachers. SPT = teachers in special education. Admin = Administration. Elect = electronic. Lib = librarian.

interviewed from school D had different meeting frequency and times; therefore, they were labeled D1 and D2. Looking across schools, most interviewees indicated that a typical meeting lasted anywhere from 30 to 60 min, with a single school coming in under the 30 min mark. These were typically held biweekly with the teacher team (usually consisting of a math, English, social studies, and science teacher), the STF, the CIS coordinator, and CY members in attendance. At most schools, an administrator or school liaison also attended occasionally. In some cases a special educator, school counselor, or elective teacher was invited. In all but two of the schools, the STF facilitated the EWI meeting, along with being responsible for preparing the student data for the meeting. When the STF was unavailable, teams either canceled the meeting or had another team member, often the CIS coordinator, facilitate the meeting. About half of the teams used an electronic form to present the data, often consisting of Google Docs projected on a screen in the meeting room. The teams with printed data were provided folders with this information.

Most EWI team members reported a rocky start to holding regular meetings. Some teams did not have all essential team members at the beginning of the year and some teams did not share the same students. As one teacher stated, “We had the facilitator and CIS organizer replaced mid-year; it was detrimental to not hit the ground strong.” This lack of organization impedes follow-through on student interventions.

Scheduling of the EWI meeting was difficult for some schools. Often, meeting scheduling had to retrofit to the needs of teachers and other school staff. One STF reported that they originally had early meetings, as early as 7:30 in the morning, but attendance was quite low, which affected the efficiency of the meeting. Another interviewee, however, felt that earlier meetings are better because it is difficult to “switch gears” in the middle of the day. Some schools have even tried simultaneous meetings of multiple teams to cut down on scheduling confusion. However, this caused issues for individuals, such as the CIS coordinator and STF, who should be present in each meeting, but instead had to choose which team to sit with during that scheduled time. Respondents emphasized that regular attendance by team members is crucial for the functioning of the EWI process. The STFs who reported that their teams were not being productive and efficient often had members who were chronically late or had poor attendance. The STFs believed that this indicated an underestimation of the importance of the EWI meetings, or else a sense of inequity arising from time spent without compensation, especially when EWI meetings are scheduled during a teacher’s planning time. Teachers noted that they are often unwilling to give up this time for a meeting, even if they understand and embrace the purpose and goals of that meeting.

Even with teams showing good attendance and productivity, often key members of the group were left out. At one school, for example, the dean of students often could not attend due to scheduling conflicts. However, because the dean of students often leads the intervention charge, having that individual in the meetings would have made the meetings even more productive. Others who did not attend on a regular basis included high-level administrators and school counselors. As one principal put it: “For us, one of the hardest things was getting the whole team on board, calendar it and stick to it. One strategy that has worked is administrator consistency. If we are this involved with children, teachers should be equally invested.”

Commonalities emerged in how the meeting agendas unfolded at the visited schools. Team members reported that often EWI meetings started with a follow-up discussion of the students discussed the previous week, to check in on intervention implementation or outcomes. Next, the team might focus on one student with a major issue, usually determined by a severe behavior or acute crisis. Next, the team worked through the focus list, often prepared ahead of time by the

STF for the meeting. At some schools, STFs provided the focus list days prior to the meeting, yet STFs at other schools distributed the list at the meeting. Finally, the STF opened up the discussion for the group to nominate any new students to the list who warranted discussion. Team members were often asked by the STF to think about these nominations before the meeting.

When asked to give advice to others on the meeting process, STFs noted that it was always good to have a list of students on hand because if one does not have the list, one will find that the team may talk about the same student every week. Further, they said it was best to rotate throughout the list so that all the focus students were discussed and not missed week after week. As one STF mentioned, “The goal is that there are never students which do not get addressed. If we miss discussing someone on the focus list at one meeting, I put the student in bold letters to be discussed at the next meeting.” Finally, the team members interviewed wanted us to know that it was important to give time for interventions to take effect. One team member noted that premature follow-up discussion was akin to being on a diet and checking one’s weight every few hours. Often, when an intervention is in place, it might be best to have a set waiting period before that student was discussed again in a team meeting.

Some teams found that discussion of one student could overtake the entire EWI meeting. Often this student was the most challenging and interrupting. One STF mentioned that it was so disruptive that she had to take one student off of the focus list for a few weeks to both give the interventions time to work and to give the team a chance to discuss other students with warning signs. Related to that was the challenge of students remaining on the focus list for a long time and seeing no improvement. Frustration was palpable in some of the accounts from the interviewees: “Six weeks of interventions and I feel like we are still on ground zero with this kid.” A team might need ideas for a new intervention, or it could be the case that the student was resisting change. The consensus among teachers was that grades and behavior are easier to change than attitude. A third challenge noted during the EWI meetings was focusing the conversation on interventions, rather than on storytelling or griping. It took time and experience to develop a meeting flow.

Even with some rocky starts and continuing questions, when asked to share the strengths of their own EWI process, interviewees had a lot to praise. One of the most common strengths mentioned was the team’s ability to communicate well, including sharing information, ideas, and different perspectives about students and following up with missing team members. Many interviewees also reported that their team stayed focused on solutions during the meeting and could move the conversation along to discuss each student. Team members felt that they understood their students, built good relationships with them, and could identify which students were struggling. Through these relationships, they felt that they were better able to match interventions to students. Finally, team members believed they had a good sense of partnership and teamwork which helped them feel accountable for follow-through on interventions.

Tiered Interventions

The last set of research questions asked about the typical practices and implementation challenges around finding and following through on student interventions. Interviews and observations yielded a group of seven types of interventions commonly used by EWI teams (Table 3). Although many team members reported that they were partial to using interventions that have

TABLE 3
Interventions Discussed in Interviews and Observations

Intervention	Examples
Parental involvement	Phone calls home Teacher-parent meetings Parent workshops
Clubs	Parents invited to sit in class Girl club about gossiping Men who dream club English as a second language Sports/reality-oriented physical experiences High school readiness/career club <i>Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul</i> reading club
Instructional changes	Hands-on experiences Tied to personal lives with relevant examples Work with different peers during collaboration Move student's seat closer to the teacher Reteach what the students do not understand Daily conduct report sheets
Counseling	Peer tutoring Classroom changes Home visits Matching students to community based organizations and resources Helping students with clinical depression, pregnancies, and death in family Help students get needed things: glasses, alarm clocks, shoes ... Anger management plans
Tutoring	Drug prevention and decision making counseling Group counseling Pep talks One on one with teacher After-school tutoring clubs Pull-outs for individual instruction
Detention	Small group tutoring in class Lunch After-school Take-away gym time Games time for good attendance
Positive reinforcement	Incentive sheets VIP lounge or lunch

worked well in the past, most agreed that new interventions are sought out when past interventions either have not worked for a particular student. Being on a team allowed teachers and staff to discover this early, through the sharing of ideas during the EWI meeting. In many of the meetings we observed, those around the table shared best practices and built interventions around these conversations.

When asked how the team generates intervention ideas, some mentioned consulting books or seeking help from others in the school who might not sit in on EWI meetings, including special education teachers or the counselor. Some teams started listing interventions in order to keep these available during meetings. One school assigned a CY corps member to be a behavior

captain in charge of reading and intervention ideas for the team. According to one STF, “We generally have CY members responsible for different things. For example, CY behavior captains take on the responsibility to find and share intervention ideas and have been talking with other corps members about what they can do to help with behavior.”

Not all interventions were easy to implement. For example, teams noted that parental involvement could, at times, be nonexistent. Often families did not have a phone or the phone was disconnected, making it difficult to reach a parent or guardian. In those cases, teachers often had students carry a behavior or conduct sheet to be signed by a parent or guardian and returned to school the next day. This seemed to work for some, but not all students. Student groups were also very effective with some students, but it was often difficult to find time for these groups to meet. One of the most productive interventions to address academic difficulties is tutoring. But schools are almost always too short-staffed to provide the needed intensity. Partners like City Year, who provide additional staff who can hold tutoring sessions after school or as needed in the classroom, make an important contribution to schools.

After the EWI meeting, team members were assigned or volunteer to lead interventions for focus list students. This became a challenge when interventions were slow to be put into place or interventions were not initiated at all. For example, one team member explained that interventions for which the school psychologist was accountable were always slow due both to a heavy caseload and to a series of steps (parental permission forms, assessments) that took time to collect before the intervention could start. Other times, due to disorganization, interventions just did not happen. Strong teams kept a running record of meetings and the timing of interventions. The STF might review the interventions that were to take place that week and check in with staff members to see how everything was going. Record-keeping is also a great way to streamline data so that everyone knows who is in charge of different components of a particular intervention. This prevented more than one team member from redundantly providing a particular support. As one City Year Corp member put it: “I feel very good after a meeting when I walk away with a very focused plan for intervention. It makes me feel accountable.”

We asked team members to comment on whether they had observed an improvement in performance for the students assigned to the focus list. For those teams visited early in the school year, team members concluded that it was too early to tell because they had not known the students for long. For those teams visited later in the year, team members confirmed improvements in student performance, with the caveat that the most challenging students took a long time to show improvement. Most team members noted improvements in EWI for their focus list students, including higher levels of attendance, fewer suspensions, grade improvements, less write-ups and referrals, and fewer unsatisfactory marks on report cards. They reported that these improvements often moved students off the focus list, although teams often checked back in with these students to make sure the improvements continued. Other improvements noted involved students’ attitudes towards school, such as greater self-confidence as learners, higher levels of engagement (e.g., active listening in class), and more focus on school work.

CONCLUSION

A student may disengage from school for a multitude of reasons, including having a poor self-concept related to failing numerous times, not connecting with his or her teachers, and dealing

with out-of-school issues. Fortunately, these disengaged students can be identified far before the decision to drop out of high school has been made. Research has shown that it is possible to get students back on the path to graduation if they are identified early and supports are provided (Balfanz et al., 2011).

Forming connections with teachers and adults in the school has been shown to be an important factor in keeping students engaged in school (e.g., Martin & Dowson, 2009). A respected adult can continually send the message to the student that although school can be difficult at times, it is vitally important. Instituting teacher teams to review student data and collaborate on interventions not only helps teachers feel connected to others in working together to solve problems with students, but the team makes it more likely that more than one adult is looking out for students slipping off the graduation track. Everyone on the team is responsible for understanding the student and taking part in interventions.

The EWI team meeting is one way in which teams can meet and support each other in identifying and initiating interventions with students. However, this is not always a smooth process. With three nonprofit organizations also working with teams of teachers, it is not surprising that these pioneers of the EWI meeting process faced multiple challenges. This study identified numerous challenges that could arise and strategies for addressing them.

First, team members stated that it is important to set up the process of data collection and identifying focus students early and to make this process, with the help of an electronic system, as simple as possible. Some teams found that looking at the early warning indicators of attendance, behavior, and course performance helped the team identify and discuss more students, even those who were quietly failing without displaying behavior problems. Teachers commented that without the early warning indicator available they were more likely to focus on students with severe behavior problems, such as fighting, acting out, or being disruptive during class. For this reason, it is recommended that up-to-date student data on each of the early warning indicators be presented at each and every EWI meeting.

The data we gathered from observations and interviews indicates similarity among the teams. Data from the 10 Diplomas Now pilot schools indicate that the typical meeting was held biweekly and lasted 30–60 min. During the meeting, around seven or eight students were discussed with around 3 to 5 min spent on each student. The STF, City Year Corp members, and the CIS counselor were reported to attend the meetings, and in some meetings others such as administration or school counselors also attended. Most team members reported a rocky start to the team process, involving issues related to scheduling the time of the EWI meeting and trying to convince team members to attend consistently. During the meeting, team members suggest keeping to a list of preselected focus students to make sure that students are not missed, that the same students are not discussed every week, and that conversation around one student does not dominate the meeting.

Finally, matching interventions to students is a very important step in the EWI process. To make this process easier, many teams formed lists of well-tested and commonly used interventions of their team and school. Having this list available at the meeting made it easier to decide on interventions. When these interventions did not work for a particular student, or a novel situation arose, teams sought new interventions from books and brainstorming discussions with other school staff. It is important for the STF, as well as the team member responsible for making sure the intervention has been completed, to keep track of the interventions for each student. Schools are very busy places and it is very easy for team members to forget or procrastinate on

these responsibilities. One way to track interventions is by reviewing past interventions at the start of each meeting.

The teams described in this article were pioneers of this work. Although things did not always go smoothly, in the end each team was able to work out its own challenges and become stronger. However, as more schools implement EWI team meetings, more support and materials are being created to make the process easier and smoother for those new to the process. This early work, and lessons shared in this article, can pave the way for others starting the EWI team meetings process.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was prepared with support from the Pearson Foundation. Additional support for this report was provided by grant No. R305A080211 from the Institute of Education Sciences. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the Foundation or Institute of Education Sciences, nor do references to trade names, commercial products, services, and organizations imply endorsement by the Foundation or Institute of Education Sciences.

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APPENDIX A. EWI PROCESS STUDY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduction to EWI Process

- 1) How were you introduced to the EWI process?
- 2) Did you feel that the training was adequate? What could have been done differently to make the implementation of the process easier on you?
- 3) What were your initial thoughts/feelings towards the EWI process? How do you feel about it now?

Teacher Teaming and Data

- 4) Realistically, how often do your EWI teams meet?
- 5) How long do your meetings typically last?
- 6) Who participates in the meetings? What organizations are represented?
- 7) Do all individuals/organizations participate in every meeting?

- 8) If a participant misses a meeting, what is the protocol for information sharing/ assignment of tasks?
- 9) Who facilitates your meetings? Does that responsibility rotate?
- 10) What materials do you use at the meetings (e.g., class lists, lists of students, student data)? Are they paper or electronic? Who prepares them and brings them to the meeting?
- 11) How do you choose which students to focus on during each meeting?
- 12) What factors are considered when identifying the most “at risk” students?
- 13) Depending on their individual focus, do partners ever disagree about who is most “at risk” and should be discussed? If so, how is that situation handled?

Implementation of Student Interventions

- 14) Do you have a set of interventions you apply to different types of students? How was that generated? Have you added new interventions?
- 15) How do you know that an assigned intervention for a student has occurred? If it hasn’t, how is that situation dealt with?
- 16) Have you observed improvements in performance of students that were discussed during your meetings? What does that look like, and how do you quantify it?

Using an EWI System

- 17) Have you encountered challenges as a facilitator throughout the EWI process? How have you resolved them?
- 18) Has the group encountered challenges throughout the EWI process? How have you resolved them?
- 19) What does your EWI group do really well?
- 20) What EWI pitfalls and strategies would you like to share with schools that are considering implementing the process?
- 21) Do you have materials that you use you can share with us?