

Meeting Six Critical Challenges to Improving Low-Performing High Schools: Lessons from Recent Research

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Overview

- **Goals for Students**
- **Recognizing the Problem**
- **Critical Challenges and Strategic Priorities**
- **Learning What Works**
- **Caveats and Cautions**

Goals: From Dropout Prevention to Lifelong Learning

- **Shared goals for students:**
 - **Keep students in high school through graduation.**
 - **Provide credentials needed to enter post-secondary education and employment.**
 - **Build knowledge, skills, and attitudes for success in higher education and the labor market and for lifelong learning.**
- **Overarching challenge for dropout prevention and high school reform: address all three goals *for all students* simultaneously.**

Indications of Problems in Low-Performing High Schools

- *Look at the 9th grade*
- **Poor prior preparation**
- **Low levels of engagement**
- **Retention in grade**

Indications of Problems in Low-Performing High Schools

Characteristics of Students in Nonselective High Schools
in Four Large, Urban School Districts
School Year 1998-1999

Characteristic	9th Grade	10th-12th
Overage for grade ^a (%)	44.4	34.9
Currently repeating grade ^b (%)	22.9	9.5
8th-grade test scores		
Reading Comprehension		
Percent scoring at or above grade level	25.7	n/a
Math		
Percent scoring at or above grade level	25.7	n/a
11th-grade test scores		
Reading comprehension		
Percent scoring at or above grade level	n/a	27.5
Math		
Percent scoring at or above grade level	n/a	24.0
Attendance rate ^c (%)	76.6	81.0
Students with an attendance rate of: (%)		
90% or higher	44.7	48.1
80% or lower	39.6	33.2
Promoted to 10th grade on time ^d	57.0	n/a
Promoted to 12th grade on time ^e	39.9	n/a

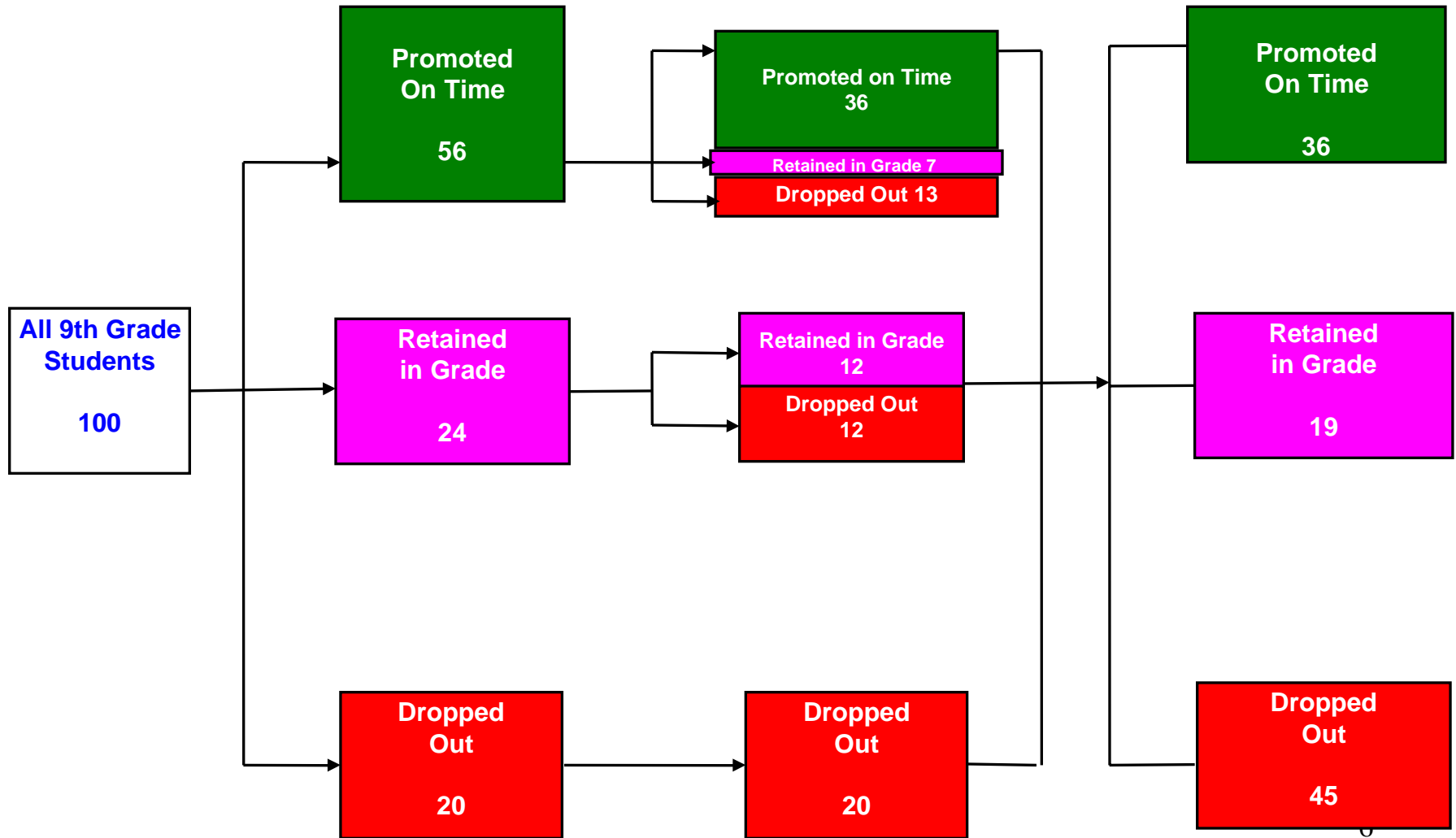
Why focus on Ninth Grade? Leaks in the Educational Pipeline

9th Grade Entrants

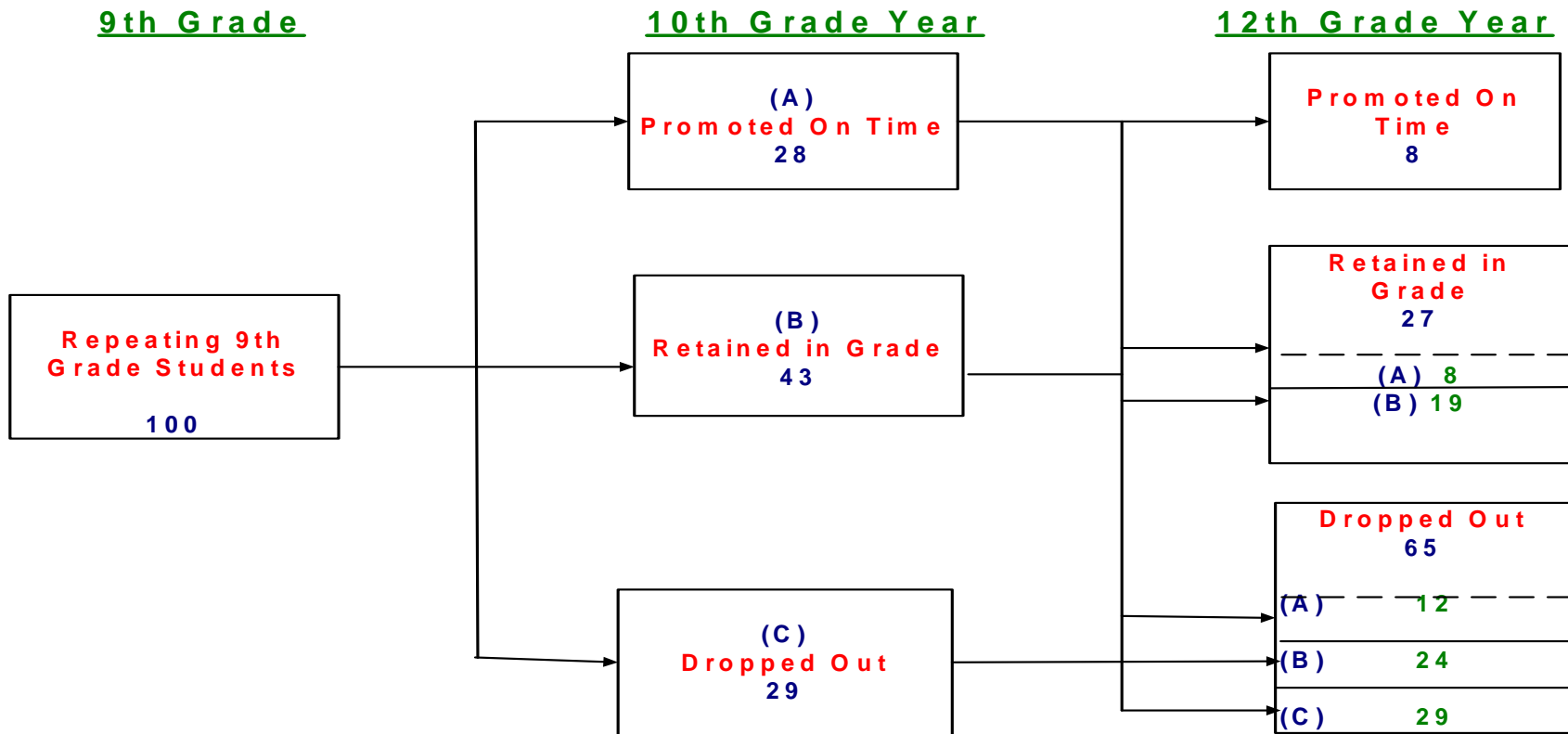
10th Grade Year Status

12th Grade Year Status

Summary Over Four Years



What if Ninth Graders do not get promoted?



Six Critical Challenges

- **Creating personalized learning environments.**
- **Assisting students who enter high school with poor literacy and math skills.**
- **Improving instructional content and pedagogy.**
- **Preparing students for the world beyond high school.**
- **Stimulating change and sustaining high performance.**
- **Building knowledge about what works, what does not work and why.**

Strategic Priorities

- Focus on the 9th grade, but do not postpone problem until 10th grade
- Balance youth development and schooling priorities
- Help adults, help students
- Make the investment in knowledge-building commensurate with the investment in innovation

Knowledge Base

- **MDRC's Rigorous Evaluations of:**
 - **Career Academies**
 - **Talent Development High Schools**
 - **First Things First**
 - **Project GRAD**
 - **Enhanced Reading Opportunities Demonstration**
- **What Works Clearinghouse**

Challenge 1: Creating a Personalized Learning Environment

➤ Evidence:

- SLCs promote personalized, supportive environment and positive relationships.
- Faculty advisory systems link students to a teacher who is looking out for their well-being.
- Not sufficient alone to raise achievement and prevent dropout.

➤ Potential:

- SLCs may provide necessary platform for reforms aimed at instructional improvement, supports for post-secondary transition, and accountability.

Challenge 2: Enhancing Basic Literacy and Math Skills

➤ Evidence:

- Sequential transitional courses focused on literacy and math are associated with substantial improvements in performance and promotion to 10th grade.
- Double dose, extended block periods provide key structural framework for transitional courses.
- A double-blocked schedule can enable students to earn more credits per year than other arrangements.
- Supplementary literacy classes in 9th grade improve skills of low performing students.

➤ Potential:

- Supplementary literacy and math classes may improve overall performance throughout high school.
- Literacy across the curriculum may improve overall performance in all subject areas.
- Transitional/supplemental math classes aimed at ensuring that students complete college prep math sequence.

Challenge 3: Improving Instructional Content and Pedagogy

➤ Evidence:

- Teachers benefit from well-designed curricula and lesson plans that have already been developed.
- Teacher professional development and coaching appear to be necessary for building instructional capacity and responsive teaching.
- Student achievement may be enhanced when teachers work together to make sure that curricula and lessons are engaging, aligned, and rigorous.

➤ Potential:

- Applied learning may improve academic achievement
- Deploying high quality teachers to ninth grade, and to other high need students, can improve overall school performance

Challenge 4: Preparing Students for the World Beyond High School

➤ Evidence:

- Career awareness and development activities, in and outside of school, provide effective tools for transitions to employment without limiting access to college.
- Incentives not sufficient to improve preparation for college entrance.

➤ Potential:

- Ongoing guidance, mentoring, and advocacy can improve preparation for transitions without limiting options for post-secondary education and employment.

Challenge 5: Stimulating Change and Sustaining High Performance

➤ Evidence:

- External expertise and intensive support appear to be critical to capacity building.
- District support may not be a necessary condition for initiating reforms, but is required for long-term sustainability.
- Strategic reform requires assessment of what is already in place and the capacity of local personnel.

➤ Potential:

- Building internal capacity and “distance” coaching and TA may promote high fidelity scaling up of effective reforms.

Challenge 6: Building Knowledge

➤ Evidence:

- Strongest evidence is on the nature of the problems.
- Strong evidence on the difference between high performing and low performing high schools.
- Much more limited evidence on effective strategies for transforming low-performing high schools into high-performing high schools.
- A focus on outcomes and not impact has left a track record of getting the wrong answer to the right question.

➤ Promise:

- Need to address questions about what works as well as questions about why, how, and under what circumstances.
- Knowledge building is the domain of researchers, policy makers and practitioners.

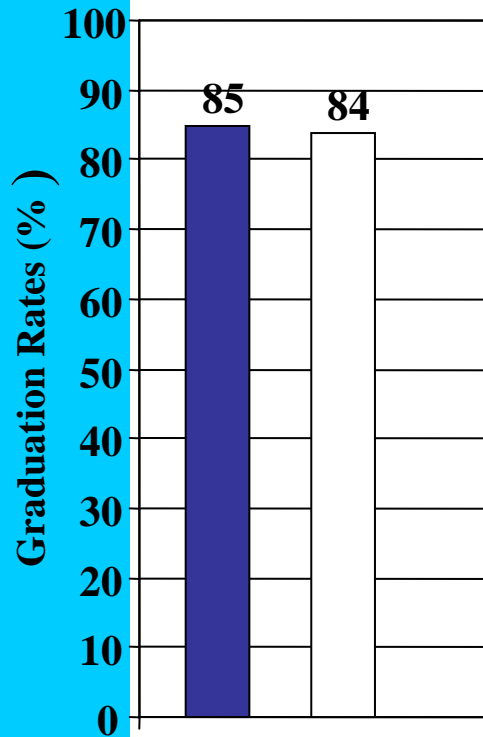
Learning What Works

Why Conduct Impact Evaluations?

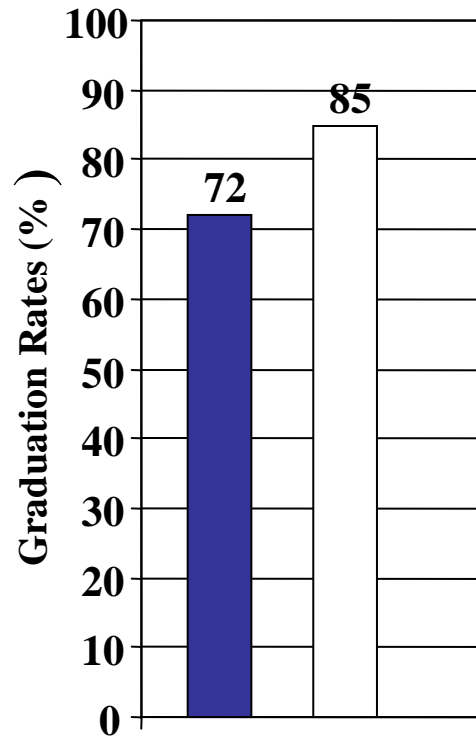
- **Outcomes (measures of performance) vs. Impacts (effect of intervention on performance)**
- **Outcome-focused studies risk getting the wrong answer to the right question**
- **Outcome standards risk awarding programs:**
 - based on who they serve, rather than what they do
 - that operate under promising conditions, rather than use promising practices

Judging Program Impact

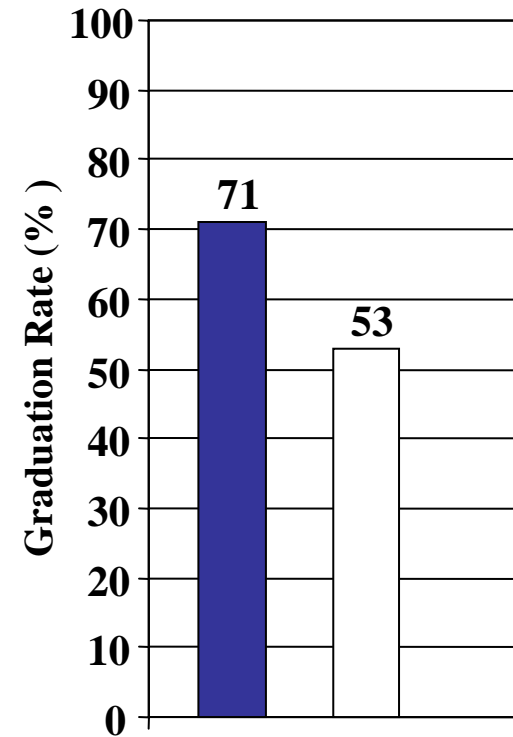
High School Graduation Rates



Program A



Program B



Program C

 Program Group
marc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

 Control Group

Caveats and Cautions

- Evidence base is limited, but improving
- Problems are multidimensional, so must be the solutions: components are interdependent and interacting
- Angels/devils are in the details of implementation
- Important not to dismiss modest, but positive improvements
- Give reform a chance: with promising interventions, staying the course can be as important as the course that is taken

What Works Clearinghouse Ratings for Dropout Prevention Programs

TABLE 1. EFFECTIVENESS RATINGS FOR 11 DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS IN THREE DOMAINS

Intervention Name	Staying in school		Progressing in school		Completing school	
	Rating of effectiveness	Extent of evidence	Rating of effectiveness	Extent of evidence	Rating of effectiveness	Extent of evidence
ALAS (Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success) (no website available)	+	Small	+	Small		
Career Academies (Developer Website)	+	Small	+	Small	○	Small
Check & Connect (Developer Website)	++	Small	+	Small	○	Small
Financial Incentives for Teen Parents to Stay in School (no website available)	+	Medium to large	○	Small	○	Medium to large
High School Redirection (no website available)	+-	Medium to large	+	Medium to large	○	Medium to large
Middle College High School (Developer Website)	○	Small			○	Small
Project GRAD (Developer Website)			○	Small	○	Small
Quantum Opportunity Program (Developer Website)			○	Small	○	Small
Talent Development High Schools (Developer Website)			+	Small		
Talent Search (Developer Website)					+	Medium to large
Twelve Together (no website available)	+	Small	○	Small		

Key

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|--|--|
| ++ Positive effects: strong evidence of a positive effect with no overriding contrary evidence | + Potentially positive effects: evidence of a positive effect; no overriding contrary evidence |
| +- Mixed effects: evidence of inconsistent effects | ○ No discernible effects: no affirmative evidence of effects |
| - Potentially negative effects: evidence of negative effect , no overriding contrary evidence | -- Negative effects: strong evidence of a negative effect with no overriding contrary evidence |

Note: WWC intervention reports describe each program and provide information on the students, cost, and scope of use. To view the intervention reports, please click on the program name or go to www.whatworks.ed.gov. When available, websites offering additional information about the program are included after the program name.