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ISSUE FOCUS

Postsecondary Readiness

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WestEd 

Q&A with WestEd's Pamela
Burdman on Community
Colleges and Postsecondary
Readiness

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R&D Alert covers issues affecting schools, communities, and human development professionals throughout the United States. Current and previous issues are available at WestEd.org/R&DAlert. Your comments are welcomed. Please address them to Noel White at nwhite@WestEd.org.

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WestEd's work spans K–16 education and beyond. This issue of *R&D Alert* addresses a topic that connects the upper levels of this span: **postsecondary readiness**.

For this theme, *R&D Alert* recently spoke with Pamela Burdman, Senior Project Director, who focuses on postsecondary readiness and completion, a new concentration area of WestEd's Innovation Studies program. Prior to joining WestEd in 2009, Burdman was a Program Officer with the Hewlett Foundation's Education Program, where she had primary responsibility for grants related to California's community colleges.

Her emphasis at WestEd is on research, analysis, and outreach strategies that advance policies and practices for improving educational outcomes for students who attend public institutions, especially two-year colleges. In this Q&A, she shares some of her perspectives and expertise on postsecondary readiness and completion.

A FOCUS ON SUCCESS

Q&A

with WestEd's
Pamela Burdman

on community colleges and
postsecondary readiness



Q Much of your work has focused on community colleges. How do community colleges fit into the larger picture of postsecondary education?

A These colleges have opened opportunity for more students to attend college than can be accommodated by the nation's four-year universities. Community colleges enroll almost half of the students in higher education in the United States, and in California it's close to 70 percent. Among underserved students, the proportion is even higher. These institutions deserve far greater attention than they often receive because the majority of their students don't ultimately attain a degree or credential that will allow them to better their lives or increase their economic well-being. That needs to change.

Q What are the reasons for the stalled progress of these students?

A There are several reasons. One relates very closely to the issue of their transition from high school and readiness for higher education. These students generally come to college with insufficient preparation, often through no fault of their own.

To do better, colleges need an accurate picture of how many students are coming to college adequately prepared.

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They may have graduated from high school but not acquired the skills that are expected of a college student, so ended up in remedial classes. In some cases, this is not because they didn't do well in high school, but because their high schools teach different material than colleges expect them to learn.

Or they may have delayed attending college and therefore gotten rusty in their skills, especially math. They may be English language learners who never fully mastered academic English, even though they graduated from high school in the United States.

But there are other barriers these students face *after* they get to a community college. If they are at a remedial level — the current term is “developmental education” — they are often required to take classes that may not be taught well or may not be structured to meet their needs. Traditional remedial classes are known as “drill and kill.” Such classes are not designed to inspire and excite the mind. These may be similar to the classes the students had in high school, so they're repeating an experience in which they were unsuccessful.

Students typically do not earn college credit for remedial coursework, so they may feel they're spinning their wheels taking classes that don't interest them. Secondly, because these students are ill-prepared and many, I would say most, come from families without a history of college success, they have a greater need for counseling and other supports.

Q Research has found that the high school students who most need counseling about getting into and succeeding in college often are the least likely to receive such assistance because of overburdened staff and conflicting priorities. Is there a similar situation at community colleges as well?

A Exactly. The students who most need extra guidance are least likely to receive it because of how community colleges are funded and organized. Many community colleges are organized in silos. For example, academic instruction and counseling are separated. But the students' needs aren't so neatly separated or defined. Community colleges also receive less funding per student than do four-year universities. Financial incentives in most states focus on getting students to enroll, not necessarily helping them succeed once there. And policy analysts increasingly are questioning the appropriateness of this funding structure.

Q Are there alternatives? Finding funding to support successful transitions, rather than just enrollment?

A Washington State is experimenting with a model where a portion of the community college's funding is based on how many students achieve certain milestones, such as completing one year of college. Oklahoma has tried a similar approach for all of higher education. The research is still unclear, but there's a growing recognition that the current system is not fulfilling what states want and need.

In addition, the Obama administration has proposed the American Graduation Initiative, which would provide funding to colleges and states that are tracking success rates of students and using that information to develop innovations. For federal or state governments to set this as a priority sends a very loud signal.



Q If the focus is to shift more toward supporting completion, what does that mean for K–12 schools and for colleges concerned about postsecondary readiness?

A Great question. Often the transition from high school to community college is the weakest link in the chain of upward mobility. As a result, large numbers of disadvantaged students have no idea what their options are or how to prepare for college. Many think that if they just graduate from high school, they can make it in college, so they're stunned to find themselves in remedial classes. I think the fact that this affects so many students is a failure of both our high schools and our colleges. Policymakers also bear responsibility. But it's not helpful for any of these to blame the others.

To do better, colleges need an accurate picture of how many students are coming to college adequately prepared. They then need to know what is happening to those students who are not prepared. Community colleges need to have good relationships with high schools, so that they can work on increasing the percentage of students who graduate high school prepared for college. They must work also with four-year universities, and with local employers, and have strong relationships with social service agencies that help disconnected youth and immigrants. None of this is easy. Community colleges have been referred to as “the systems integrator.” This role is much broader than the standard conception of what a school or college is.

Q Can you give any more specific suggestions for what colleges can do so that students who aren't academically prepared for college-level classes have a better chance of succeeding?

A Here's one example: Classes that explicitly help students develop good study skills, rather than focusing solely on the academic content, have been shown to increase course completion rates by 8–25 percent. Other examples are programs that combine remedial coursework with academic or vocational courses, such as remedial math and physiology for nursing students; and creating learning communities where a cohort of students take classes together and develop peer support systems. In an ideal world, these strategies would be published and every college would implement them immediately, but in practice, it is a challenge for colleges to adopt even proven strategies.

Q Would it be fair to say we are at a transition stage nationally in terms of understanding the importance of community colleges?

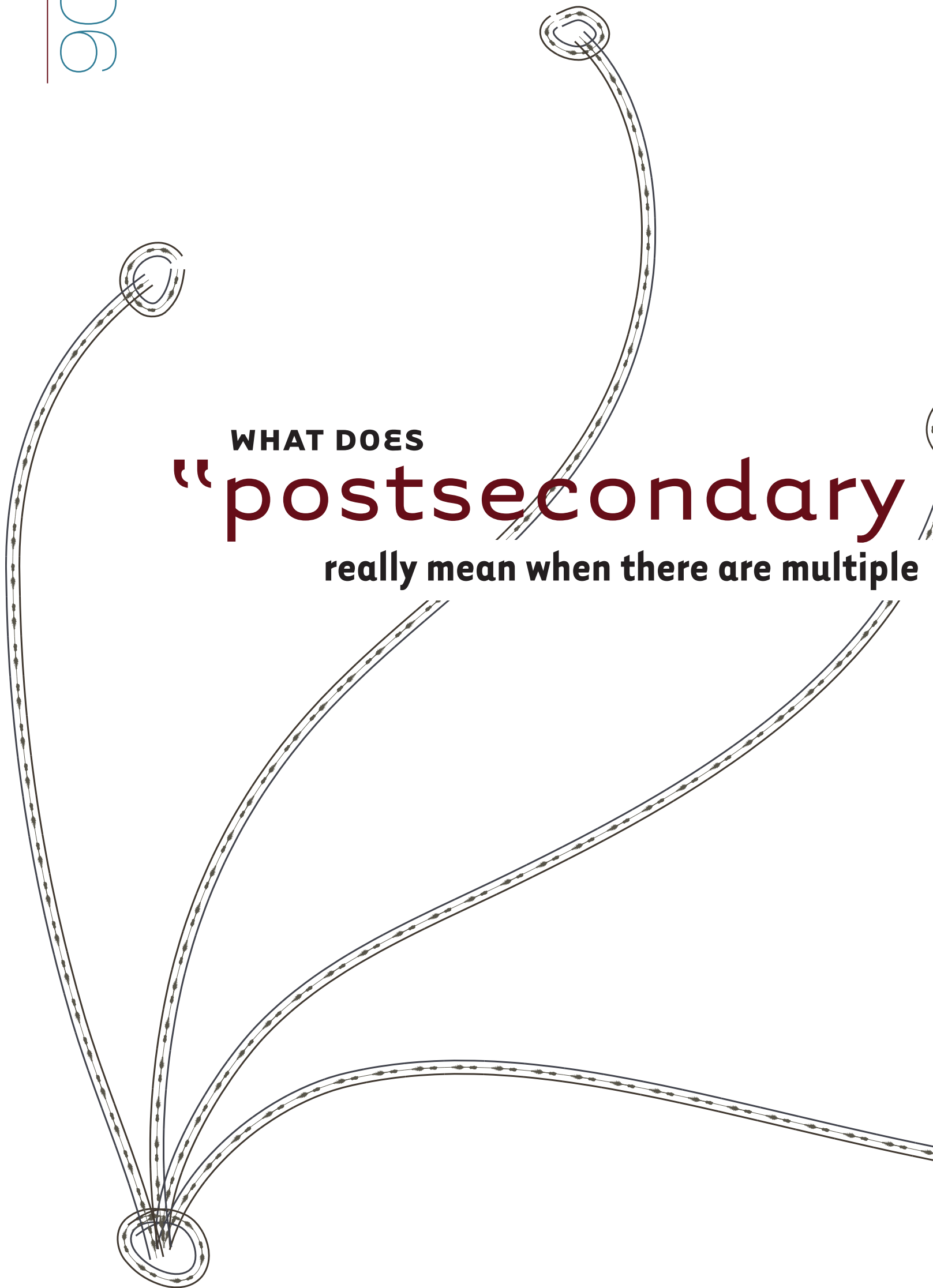
A Yes, that's true. We are moving from a period in which community colleges are overlooked and ignored and treated as second-class institutions to a period in which there's a more intense focus on how critical these institutions are to improving the lives of large numbers of students in the country. The increased scrutiny is somewhat difficult for community colleges. I think there's an appreciation of the attention and additional investment, but there's also some discomfort among community college leaders that their success rates are under a microscope.

From a policy standpoint, community colleges and their students traditionally have not had much clout. But they are part of our economy and our social fabric. We cannot remain an economically advanced nation if the students in these colleges are left behind. Consider this: The majority of healthcare workers, firefighters, and law enforcement officers in this country are educated at community colleges. Can we afford *not* to focus more on ensuring their success?




For more information, contact Pamela Burdman at 415.225.4596 or pburdman@WestEd.org.

WHAT DOES
“postsecondary”
really mean when there are multiple



>> Despite a lot of recent attention to “postsecondary readiness,” there is little consensus on what the term means. Numerous national and state organizations have developed definitions, with key commonalities and differences among them. The growing interest in postsecondary readiness reflects a common concern about how well students are prepared for education and employment beyond high school. But the multiple definitions often reflect substantive differences in interpretation, purpose, and use. And when definitions are used to guide policy or priorities, such differences can be significant.



readiness”


pathways to success

Postsecondary readiness may refer broadly to preparing students for the transition from high school to multiple pathways after graduation (i.e., college or work), or more specifically to being ready for college. The demands of college can be further defined in terms of study skills and work habits, or particular content knowledge, leading some organizations to distinguish between academic preparedness for college entry and overall readiness for college success. In addition, some definitions encompass workforce preparation, while others focus on “21st century skills.”


Not only do the definitions vary, how they are used varies as well. Some states use readiness definitions to shape their K–12 standards and assessments. Districts and schools may consider postsecondary readiness in decisions about curricula, instruction, and support services. Readiness definitions may help guide colleges and employers as they select assessments and other tools to gauge students’ need for remedial support or eligibility for employment.

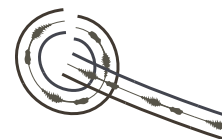
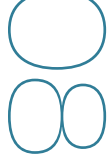
Given this diversity of meaning and intent, how can policymakers and educators make sense of the options and choose which postsecondary readiness definition is best for their particular purpose and context? What are the implications of choosing one definition over another?

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Stanley Rabinowitz, Director of WestEd's Assessment and Standards Development Services (ASDS), emphasizes that there is no single "best" or universal definition of postsecondary readiness that everyone should use. Instead, policymakers and educators need to look carefully at the differences among definitions and what they emphasize or downplay.

Rabinowitz recommends that users look at information about both "external validation" and the "internal structures" of different definitions by considering their sources, content, organization, and level of detail. Key questions to ask are:

- * How has the definition been validated by others?
- * What kind of content does it address?
- * How is the content organized?
- * How specific is the definition?
- * How does the definition address similarities and differences across multiple pathways?

How has the definition been validated by others?

Nearly all developers of postsecondary readiness definitions cite a research base underlying their efforts, though the nature of that base varies. Developers may rely on syntheses of others' research to guide their decisions about what is important for postsecondary success. And, to supplement what is known or believed, some developers carry out their own research, such as analyzing high school or college coursework and expectations, surveying college professors and employers, and performing task analyses of entry-level jobs across a range of industries. Says Rabinowitz, "The key step here is to identify or develop appropriate indicators of success against which the definitions can be validated."

When considering the sources of external validity, Rabinowitz says it is important to

take into account their varying nature, such as how extensive the research base is and whether the research can be expected to generalize across settings and pathways. Ideally, he adds, policymakers should "triangulate" across multiple sources of credible information to examine the strength and comprehensiveness of the evidence for a given definition.

What kind of content does it address?

Different definitions of postsecondary readiness emphasize different types of content. A 2008 report by ASDS for the state of Colorado describes a continuum that can be divided into three categories:

- * definitions that emphasize core academic knowledge and skills,
- * those that integrate core academics with applied skills (also called "thinking skills"), and
- * definitions with an emphasis just on applied skills.

Each emphasis has benefits and potential drawbacks. According to Rabinowitz, it is best to think of a blending of core academic content and "thinking/problem skills" in order to maximize students' ability to make cross-subject connections and develop applied skills.

How is the content organized?

Definitions of postsecondary readiness can also be grouped into another set of three categories based on how the content of the definition is "articulated" or organized:

- * by cross-grade knowledge and skills,
- * by knowledge and skills to be acquired by the end of high school, or
- * by knowledge and skills tied to specific levels leading up to high school graduation.

Again, Rabinowitz points out that there are pros and cons to each emphasis, and these differences have implications for how the definitions are best used. Cross-grade definitions tend to work best for broad "guiding principles or overarching goals," notes Rabinowitz, and can provide a "common language" for policymakers and administrators to use. But such definitions may not be as useful for refining standards or setting specific achievement benchmarks. States pursuing these purposes may be better off choosing from definitions that articulate knowledge and skills needed at the end of high school or at specified levels leading up to graduation. This clear articulation of content can contribute to a common set of goals and expectations for student learning.



It is best to think of a blending of core academic content and “thinking/problem skills” in order to maximize students’ ability to make cross-subject connections and develop applied skills.

How specific is the definition?

Similarly, the “granularity” of definitions also varies from one to another, ranging from broad to specific. Some definitions address readiness at a very general level, identifying broad-stroke themes that constitute readiness for postsecondary education or employment. Such definitions can be useful for communicating a state’s high-level goals for students and can thereby help guide some policy and program decisions.

Broad-stroke definitions are not as useful for more detailed decisions. A readiness definition that spells out more specific knowledge and/or skills may be more useful to refine K–12 standards and ensure the standards are measurable, for example, or to develop an end-of-course or admission exam.

According to Rabinowitz, the best approach may be to develop broad-stroke, brief definitions for communicating big ideas, supplemented by more specific statements of key knowledge and skills.

How does the definition address similarities and differences across multiple pathways?

An ongoing debate is whether one readiness definition can cover all possible postsecondary pathways (e.g., select four-year college, non-competitive four-year college, two-year college, math/science-focused industry such as engineering, customer-focused industry such as marketing and hospitality). “The research is mixed at this point,” says Rabinowitz. “States may wish to develop a core that cuts across all sectors and allow the pathways to supplement that core with additional skills specific to its needs.”

Rabinowitz and ASDS colleagues at WestEd apply the above questions when helping policymakers and administrators, district leaders, and other educators sort out different definitions of postsecondary readiness and select

the elements most useful to their purposes. In 2008, for example, as part of the Colorado Department of Education’s comprehensive revision of the state’s model content standards, ASDS produced the 2008 report mentioned previously that categorizes, organizes, and analyzes major definitions of 21st century skills, college readiness, and career/postsecondary readiness.

The report covers a dozen such definitions, including College Readiness Standards and Benchmarks developed by ACT, recommendations of The Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, a Framework for 21st Century Learning, the College Board Standards for College Success, and a definition from Achieve’s American Diploma Project.

In September 2009, Rabinowitz was selected to serve on a national panel of experts for the Common Core State Standards Initiative. For his role on this committee, he notes that “the research and support we’ve provided for states and organizations over the past several years are proving invaluable.” The panel is charged with reviewing and validating both the Common Core’s development process and its resulting college- and career-readiness standards that will have broad implications nationally.



For more information about postsecondary readiness and ASDS’s work in this area, contact Stanley Rabinowitz at 415.615.3154 or srabino@WestEd.org.

once a DROPOUT, not always a DROPOUT

» For years researchers have painted a statistical portrait of high school dropouts — which demographic groups do better or worse, at which grade levels they are most likely to fail, and how leaving school prematurely affects the future behaviors and earnings of adults. These and other trends provide a retrospective on American students who don't obtain a high school diploma. But until recently, researchers have ignored the story of what happens to high school dropouts who *return* to school.

How many teenage dropouts eventually return to school, and why? Which students drop out permanently and which ones reenroll? And what results do the returning students achieve during the conventional four- or five-year time frame for high school graduation?

A new study from the Regional Educational Laboratory West at WestEd focuses on these students who have moved in the shadows of the education system. The research offers some surprising details to our understanding of the transitions that young people make — or fail to make — as they navigate through school. The study also reveals important lessons for education leaders and policymakers who seek to address the broader dropout problem throughout the country.

“What we’ve discovered is that dropping out is not always a permanent outcome,” said BethAnn Berliner, a senior research associate who directed the study along with colleagues Vanessa X. Barrat and Anthony B. Fong in partnership with Paul B. Shirk of the San Bernardino City Unified School District in California. “When these students fall off the rosters, they don’t disappear. They don’t even necessarily leave their communities. They are retrievable. And when they return, we need to do a better job of making sure they are successful.”



Causes for leaving; ways to pull them back

The WestEd study tracked 9th graders in the large, urban, and racially diverse San Bernardino school system over five years and discovered that 35 percent had dropped out at least once during that time frame. The figures are consistent with state and national averages. Most of the students disconnected during the first year of high school, revealing missteps during the critical transition period from middle school to high school. Through interviews with students and school staff, researchers identified a series of “push” factors that caused the teenagers to leave school before graduation, including academic struggles, boredom, and limited ways to make up failed course credits. But other push factors had to do with life circumstances, such as pregnancy, gang pressure, and needing to work to help support families.

Despite these challenges, nearly one-third eventually reenrolled in high school. Researchers identified a series of “pull” factors that drew the students back to school. The primary reason was the inability to find employment without a diploma. Yet students also said they were often motivated to return because of the concern of school staff.

“Kids were telling us it was the wrestling coach, it was the principal, it was the attendance officer they bumped into at a convenience store who said, ‘We love you, we miss you, we’ll do whatever it takes’ to help you get back,” Berliner explained. “Caring came

Getting them to reenroll in school is not the weak link. The weak link is helping them gain traction and succeed once they return.



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out as sort of a premium thing in terms of luring people back. Kids wanted to go where people knew their life stories, where people were non-judgmental and were trying to help them deal with their lives.”

Returning students need more support

Once they returned to school, however, students generally encountered many of the problems that caused them to drop out in the first place and few of the supports that would enable them to stay. Because of limited counseling and academic options, students tried to play catch-up without a realistic plan or a coordinated strategy of interventions and course credit recovery within the school system. Of the dropouts who returned to school, only 18 percent graduated within the five-year time period of the study.

“Getting them to reenroll in school is not the weak link,” Berliner says. “The weak link is helping them gain traction and succeed once they return.”

In addition to making academic courses more engaging and relevant, Berliner says, schools and school districts need to establish early warning systems that will identify struggling students and offer them a range of supports. Strategies that have worked include 9th grade academies that separate new students from older ones; double course periods that let students get grade-level instruction in core subjects while they simultaneously receive remediation to close skill gaps; and counselors who actively

monitor risk factors like poor attendance, low test scores, and family crises, and then direct these students to appropriate tutoring, study skills courses, and social services.

The role of policy and research

Berliner says state and federal policymakers can help by creating financial incentives for schools to reclaim dropouts and get them to graduate. Current accountability systems often penalize schools when their students drop out and re-enroll multiple times or retake and fail state exit exams.

More research also is needed at the national level to track the path of current high school dropouts in an effort to explain why only about two-thirds of the middle and high school students who say they expect to graduate and go on to college actually achieve that goal.

“The chasm between aspiration and attainment is big,” Berliner says. “When you talk to these reenrolled dropouts, you find that every single one aspires to earn a diploma. They don’t aspire to a GED. They don’t aspire to dig ditches for a living. They want to walk across the stage with cap and gown. They work hard to envision themselves being successful. But when they lose that vision because they can’t see that it will happen, because they can never catch up, they lose hope and just leave again.”

The full study, “Reenrollment of high school dropouts in a large, urban school district,” is part of the Issues & Answers research series published by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.



*For more information about this study, contact
Berliner at 510.302.4209 or bberlin@WestEd.org.
For a free pdf copy of the report, visit: [nces.ed.gov/
pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=REL2008056](https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=REL2008056).*

>> Students in California who have historically been underrepresented on college campuses may be missing out on a promising opportunity to successfully transition from high school to college, due in part to state policies that hinder them from earning college credit while in high school.

Such opportunities, in the form of what are commonly called “dual” or “concurrent” enrollment programs, have long been offered to academically gifted students in need of more intellectual rigor than their high schools could provide. But increasingly, such programs are also being used — with notable success — to improve the college readiness of low-income, minority students who often don’t think of themselves as college material.

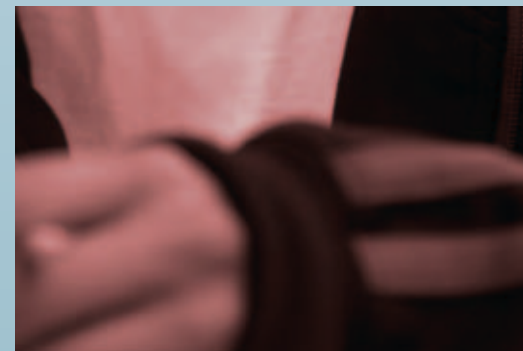
“This is the kind of innovation that is changing how schools think about what a high school education should be and, in the process, changing students’ lives,” says Andrea Venezia, a senior policy associate at WestEd who specializes in improving student readiness for higher education. Yet, according to WestEd researchers, the future of such programs in California is in limbo due to the lack of a statewide vision for dual enrollment, policies that hamper its growth and large-scale replication, and the state’s significant fiscal crisis.

“It’s hard to see barriers put in the way of the development of a comprehensive system that aligns coursework and support systems for students traditionally underserved by higher education,” says Venezia. In 2008, she led a team of WestEd researchers who undertook field research that examined state policies hindering dual enrollment in California.

The promise and challenges of



Dual Enrollment





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The work was funded largely by The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, known for its national network of 20 Early College Schools, small high schools that provide rigorous classes at both the high school and college level. WestEd's findings were based on interviews with principals and teachers at Woodrow Wilson's seven California-based Early College Schools. Other funders included Jobs for the Future and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

How dual enrollment works

The most successful dual enrollment programs, says Venezia, feature a comprehensive, aligned sequence of coursework beginning freshman year and culminating in the junior and/or senior year with college-level courses for which students simultaneously earn high school and college credit. These “capstone” classes are taught on either the high school or college campus, by either high school or college faculty members, and are the same courses offered to the college’s “regular” students. Such courses typically are in core instructional areas, such as English or math, but can also be in elective areas that target specific student interests.

According to Venezia, more research needs to be done to better understand the efficacy of dual enrollment programs for underserved students, but initial investigations credit them with motivating nontraditional students to pursue college degrees; preparing such students to successfully complete rigorous, college-level coursework; and reducing the cost of college for the state and for individual families. Research also confirms that students who earn college credits while in high school are more likely to receive a postsecondary degree, and to do so more quickly, than those who do not.

The best programs, she adds, provide students with both a pathway to college-level work and a sense of “college-going culture.” That’s one way the model differs from Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs, which historically have served more affluent, higher-achieving students — those likely to attend high schools that already have relatively strong college-going cultures.

She says the keys to the success of dual enrollment programs for traditionally underserved students include strong partnerships between high schools and postsecondary institutions; broad-based recruitment effort that seeks out low-income, minority, and underachieving

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students; instructional scaffolding techniques such as modeling and setting clear goals and expectations that support student learning; and services such as counseling, tutoring, career exploration activities, and peer support networks.

“It’s about providing traditionally underserved students with the help they need — the teachers, the scaffolding, the support services — to enroll in and pass a college course,” she says. “It makes students who don’t believe they can do it realize they can — a really important motivational approach.”

Rob Baird, Woodrow Wilson’s vice president for School-University Partnerships, agrees. “This is about more than just curriculum and academics,” he says. “It’s really about equity. We can’t let the courses that have ‘future success’ written all over them be available only to affluent kids, or those able to succeed without intervention. Our focus has to be on getting first-generation, low-income, underserved students to experience college life and work sooner. Nothing about their backgrounds has prepared them for that.”

Barriers to dual enrollment

In 2005–06, approximately 115,000 high school students in California, or about six percent of the state’s public high school students, were in dual enrollment programs.

Yet, despite the potential of these programs, WestEd's researchers unearthed a number of barriers hampering their creation and growth in California.

For example, the lack of a statewide vision for dual enrollment, says Venezia, makes such programs "vulnerable to short-term, ad hoc decisions at the local level." Allegations of financial abuses related to improper funding of dual enrollment courses in 2002 created "a climate of fear" about offering and funding dual enrollment, according to Venezia, and those problems also led to state policies that discourage participation in dual enrollment.

A WestEd report for The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation lists specific recommendations aimed at expanding dual enrollment opportunities, including the creation of new funding mechanisms,

investment in technical support and professional development for start-up programs, and an end to credit-limit caps. The report also notes that upfront costs associated with such programs may ultimately save the state money because students who participate are less likely to need remedial college-level classes and/or drop out of school before earning a degree.

Opportunities for the future

Despite barriers from California's policy environment and fiscal challenges, Venezia is encouraged by how hard some schools work to help targeted students prepare for and access higher education. At one California high school, for example, calculus might be offered only at 7:30 in the morning because just a handful of students are academically prepared to take the course. "That means the students, who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals at the school, must choose between eating breakfast and taking calculus. It is heartbreaking, but at the same time awe-inspiring, because schools like this are going to great lengths to provide opportunities for students who need them, and some students are making big sacrifices to further their learning."

Successful models elsewhere include North Carolina's "Learn and Earn" program, which allows students to attend high school on one of 60 college campuses, simultaneously earning a high school diploma and two years of college credit or an associate degree in up to five years at no cost. At Woodrow Wilson's Early College Schools in New York City, students earn as many as 25 college credits while in high school.

Both Venezia and Baird say the first step in establishing such programs is local school officials setting up partnerships with area community colleges and four-year institutions. Baird contends that while it's "more problematic getting four-year institutions to support this kind of effort," it's well worth it. "After all, we want kids ultimately to be able to walk into a four-year college and be successful." To make sure the partnerships result in effective dual enrollment programs, he says it's important to "dig as deeply as you can into the rank and file faculties of the high school and college to identify and enlist the support of the people who will be doing the work."

Given California's current budget crisis and the upfront costs associated with dual enrollment, Venezia doesn't expect to see such programs grow much over the short term. "It's definitely a work in progress," she says. Still, she believes the model's strong track record elsewhere combined with current planning "behind the scenes" should pave the way for a more welcoming environment in years to come.

It's about providing traditionally underserved students with the help they need — the teachers, the scaffolding, the support services — to enroll in and pass a college course.



For more information about WestEd's work on improving student readiness for and success in postsecondary education, contact Andrea Venezia at 415.615.3248 or avenezi@WestEd.org.

A NEW FOCUS ON INTERACTIVE LEARNING AT **community**

>> In community college classrooms, the traditional emphasis on delivering content through lectures may become less prevalent as teachers find better ways to help students engage in college-level learning. While lecturing may still have a role, it has significant limitations, especially for students new to college and those at risk of faring poorly, says Jane Braunger, Senior Research Associate with WestEd's Strategic Literacy Initiative (SLI).

New federal legislation making its way through Congress would add strength to Braunger's perspective by supporting the integration of basic skills teaching into regular content courses. The current bill, titled "The American Graduation Initiative," in the U.S. House of Representatives, supports

"blending basic skills and occupational training" and integrating "developmental education" with "for-credit coursework."

"The challenge for community college teachers has been to rethink their approach and focus more on helping students read, think, and communicate with more facility



colleges

in a particular discipline,” says Braunger. Using SLI’s Reading Apprenticeship® approach, “many community college faculty have risen to the challenge.”

Although Reading Apprenticeship was originally developed in 1995 for use in middle and high schools, the research-based approach has been introduced in recent years to growing numbers of community college teachers. Many have found their students to be underprepared for college-level work and have sought support from WestEd’s SLI. In response, Braunger and colleagues have been providing professional development in Reading Apprenticeship to help community college instructors’ ease their students’ transition into college while boosting their academic success.

Making learning visible

Reading Apprenticeship embeds reading instruction within content learning. Teachers who use Reading Apprenticeship regularly engage students in metacognitive conversations — discussions that increase the students’ awareness and understanding of how they read and think about what they read. Specifically, teachers model their own discipline-specific reading strategies.

“Teachers learn to ‘unpack’ their own reading and thought processes, making them visible to their students, in effect, their apprentices,” explains Braunger.

For example, a history teacher using the Reading Apprenticeship approach might devote class time to analyzing a particularly

dense history text. Projecting an excerpt on an overhead screen, the teacher would read it aloud, describing how he or she approaches the text. One part of the passage might prompt the teacher to make a connection to a concept covered earlier in the course; another passage might lead the teacher to make a prediction.

“As experts in their fields, the teachers know how to read texts in those fields,” says Braunger. “So, Reading Apprenticeship teachers make their own thinking and reading processes visible and accessible in order to help their students learn to read as experts too. In other words, the teachers model in strategic ways their expertise as readers and thinkers in their particular disciplines.”

Reading Apprenticeship gives these students the sense that they’re part of a community of learners working in collaborative ways to accomplish more than they might do individually.

Reading Apprenticeship classrooms also encourage students to use each other as resources. The teachers give students a chance to work in small groups, sharing the various ways they themselves grapple with course-related text. As a result, students get access to an even broader range of ways of reading and thinking. The experience tends to create a strong social network within the classroom, which, in turn, promotes risk taking, builds students’ confidence, and helps prepare them for postsecondary work. For many community college teachers, this shift has been a significant one.

Improving achievement for English learners and others

An ongoing three-year WestEd research project funded by The Lumina Foundation is evaluating the effectiveness of the Reading Apprenticeship model in community colleges. The project also supports classroom-based research by

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community college teachers who are incorporating Reading Apprenticeship in diverse content areas. An interim finding from the evaluation is that teachers report better student achievement and stronger retention in Reading Apprenticeship classrooms, especially among English learners and other at-risk students enrolled in developmental (also known as “basic skills”) classes.

Once the students are reading and understanding most of the text on their own, their teacher can use class time to focus specifically on what’s not making sense, or to delve deeper into the material.

An English as a Second Language teacher, for example, reports that after she taught students how to frame questions to guide their reading of a text, the students were able to handle more challenging material. And several composition teachers in the research group found that engaging students in talking about and reflecting on their reading of challenging academic texts significantly improved their writing. The major challenge reported is that planning and using Reading Apprenticeship activities takes additional time.

A supportive environment for teachers and students

Braunger is not surprised that Reading Apprenticeship is showing results. She points out that research supports the notion that students — whatever their age — learn best in a socially supportive classroom working with authentic text. Furthermore, given the ever-increasing number of students entering community colleges who are English language learners or have weak reading skills, the need for a literacy model that provides scaffolded instruction has never been greater.

And when it comes to improving postsecondary readiness, “Reading Apprenticeship gives these students the sense that they’re part of a community of learners working in collaborative ways to accomplish more than they might do individually,” she says. “It makes the college experience less intimidating.”

As for the teachers, “They’re grateful to learn ways to better support students’ ability to read and think in particular disciplines,” says Braunger. They also enjoy the increased interaction with students and appreciate the insight they gain into what students find easy to grasp and what is difficult to understand. “It allows the teachers to respond with the professionalism that drew them into teaching in the first place.”

The result, says Braunger, is a climate of “shared responsibility” that fosters more sophisticated teaching and learning. “Once the students are reading and understanding most of the text on their own, their teacher can use class time to focus specifically on what’s not making sense, or to delve deeper into the material. As for the students, they become more independent learners.”

Noting that it took very little modification of the Reading Apprenticeship approach to make it relevant for community college instruction, Braunger urges teachers working with students at all levels and in all subject areas to incorporate the program’s techniques into their instruction. Good teachers often do so intuitively, she says. “It means modeling what they do as expert readers in their disciplines and then giving students the time and space to practice doing the same thing with each other. It’s definitely doable, effective, and well worth the trade-off in terms of how teachers spend their time.”

Building professional development communities, transforming institutions

As of the end of 2009, more than 200 community college teachers had taken part in Reading Apprenticeship professional development sessions offered by WestEd. Most recently, with a grant from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, SLI prepared a cadre of regional Reading Apprenticeship



What high schools can do to
better prepare
students for college

A new guide from the
What Works Clearinghouse

How can high schools help more of their students make it to college and be better prepared to do college-level work?

Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do, a new practice guide from the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse, offers five straightforward recommendations:

- ✱ Offer a college preparatory curriculum and make sure that, by ninth grade, students understand academic requirements for college entry and success.
- ✱ Use assessment throughout high school to help students understand their relative readiness for college, and help them address any identified deficiencies.
- ✱ Surround students with people — adults and peers — who build and support their college-going aspirations.
- ✱ Help students complete required steps for college entry.
- ✱ Increase families' financial awareness and help students apply for financial aid.

As is true of all What Works Clearinghouse practice guides, these suggestions were developed by a panel of individuals chosen for their expertise both in the subject matter and in research methodology. The aim of each guide is to develop a list of practical recommendations based on the best available research and expert judgment and that, together, add up to a coherent approach for addressing a common — and complex — education challenge.

This particular guide began with a search for, and review of, research on college access programs in the U.S. The search yielded more than 500 studies, of which 99 had causal designs *and* focused on programs intended to ready secondary school students for college by preparing them academically, helping them complete the steps for college entry, and making it more probable that they would enroll upon acceptance. In the end, the five recommendations were rooted in 16 studies (of 10 different college-access programs) reflecting the strongest evidence available about what high schools

We wanted the guide to be applicable to practitioners in high schools where there are not programs in place to systematically prepare kids for college.

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should do to prepare more of their students for college acceptance and success.

For some readers, these recommendations will sound familiar. That's because they validate what many high schools that consistently prepare their students for college success are already doing. "There are certainly schools that routinely do everything the guide recommends — in ways that are systemic and coordinated and have broad support from the school community," says WestEd's Neal Finkelstein, one of the guide's five panelist authors. As a result, these schools routinely prepare large proportions of their students to successfully pursue college degrees.

"But there is also a whole roster of schools that send less than five percent of their students to college, and there are a lot of other schools in between," he adds. "In most high schools, if a student rooted around enough, he or she could take the classes that met the basic eligibility standards for college and get the support needed to be successful. But is it easy? Is it the culture? Is a college-ready curriculum with necessary support the default? Not necessarily."

Like his fellow authors, Finkelstein came to the panel's task having spent much of his professional life focused on secondary-to-higher-education transition issues. Prior to joining WestEd, when he served as Director of Educational Outreach Research and Evaluation for the University of California Office of the President, he studied the effectiveness of K–12 and university-based student academic preparation and support programs, particularly in relation to postsecondary education matriculation. At WestEd, his research on this topic has included, for example, examining course-taking patterns and preparation for postsecondary education in California's public university systems among minority youth.

Finkelstein recognizes that, even when high schools send a large proportion of their students to college, it does not necessarily mean that all of the college-going students are ready to succeed in their postsecondary studies. Noting that in some areas of the country about a third of incoming community college students are required to take remedial courses prior to starting credit-earning classes, he says, "The panel was very clear that if the next step after starting college is remediation, there hasn't been adequate preparation for higher education.

"We wanted the guide to be applicable to practitioners in high schools where there are not programs in place to systematically prepare kids for college."

To that end, in addition to summarizing the supporting evidence for each recommendation, the authors also include guidance on how to carry out the recommendation and, as appropriate, they provide sample materials. For example, one suggestion for implementing the first recommendation (i.e., offer courses that prepare students for college-level work and make sure they understand "what constitutes a college-ready curriculum by ninth grade") is to communicate the curriculum requirements in a mailing to eighth grade students at the high school's feeder schools. The guide includes a sample course-requirement mailing advising eighth graders that "selecting the right courses is a life-defining decision."

Equally important, the authors have drawn from their collective knowledge of both the research and the field to identify potential roadblocks to implementing each recommendation and to offer some possible solutions (though Finkelstein is quick to note that neither the roadblocks nor the solutions are intended to make up a comprehensive list). For example, the guide suggests three different ways that a school can implement the recommendation to “surround students with adults and peers who build and support their college-going aspirations.”

One suggestion is to provide mentoring by college-educated adults or by recent high school graduates who have enrolled in college. Drawing from college-access programs that have shown evidence of success, the guide explains specific ways in which mentors can help prepare high school students for college, such as serving as a college-going role model, assisting with a student’s college selection and application process, or monitoring a student’s academic progress and advocating for extra help if the student is struggling.

Identified *roadblocks* for this suggestion relate to the possibility of mentoring relationships not lasting or mentors becoming less available over time. A suggested *solution* is that high schools partner with a local college that offers academic credit for its students’ volunteer work, making it more likely that a college student would maintain the mentoring relationship for a longer period.

Given his prior research and wide reading on the topic of college readiness, Finkelstein was not surprised by much he learned in his work on the panel. What he found most important, however, was “the constant reminder that addressing just one aspect of college preparedness, like helping a family understand how to complete a financial aid form, is insufficient for getting more students to college. It’s the more holistic programs — those in which there is a strong college preparatory curriculum, effective assessment, *and* multiple, interwoven student support approaches — that show the greatest impact.”



For more information about the Helping Students Navigate the Path to College practice guide, contact Neal Finkelstein at 415.615.3171 or nfinkel@WestEd.org. To download a free copy of the guide, visit: ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc.

A sampling of resources on postsecondary readiness



Course-Taking Patterns and Preparation for Postsecondary Education in California's Public University Systems Among Minority Youth

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Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do

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Improving the Quality and Use of Postsecondary Data: A Resource Guide for Smaller Learning Communities Grantees

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Minding the Gap: Why Integrating High School with College Makes Sense and How to Do It

330 pages, \$29.95, available from:
WestEd.org/bookstore
Product #: HEP-07-0111
ISBN: 978-1-891792-45-8



Work-Based Learning in California: Opportunities and Models for Expansion

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What's New & Useful



Authors: Aída Walqui & Leo van Lier

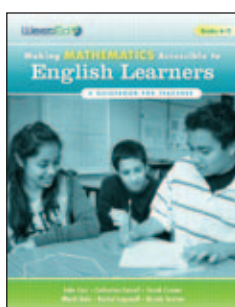
Publisher: WestEd, 2010

Pages: 232 / Price: \$27.95

Product #: PD-09-0111 / ISBN: 978-0-914409-75-5

Scaffolding the Academic Success of Adolescent English Language Learners: A Pedagogy of Promise

Too often, the needs of English language learners are met with simplified curriculum and lowered expectations. What would happen if instead classrooms were organized to honor the promise of these students by increasing the intellectual challenge of instruction, the support such a challenge requires, and students' engagement with their own learning? This book is the result of a decade-long effort in school districts such as New York City, Austin, and San Diego to implement challenging instruction for classrooms that include English learners, raising the bar and increasing engagement for all learners.



Authors: John Carr, Catherine Carroll, Sarah Cremer, Mardi Gale, Rachel Lagunoff, & Ursula Sexton

Publisher: WestEd, 2009

Pages: 128 / Price: \$24.95

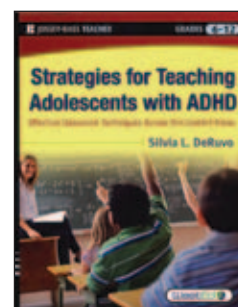
Product #: CC-09-0111 / ISBN: 978-0-914409-68-7

Making Mathematics Accessible to English Learners: A Guidebook for Teachers, Grades 6–12

This practical book helps upper elementary through high school mathematics teachers effectively reach English learners. Designed for teachers who have had limited preparation for teaching mathematics to English learners, the guide offers an integrated approach to teaching mathematics content and English language skills, including guidance on best instructional practices from the field, powerful and concrete strategies for teaching mathematics content along with academic language, and sample lesson scenarios that can be implemented immediately.

Strategies for Teaching Adolescents with ADHD: Effective Classroom Techniques Across the Content Areas, Grades 6–12

This hands-on guide is filled with information that will help teachers teach content areas to adolescent students with ADHD. The strategies in this book are research-based, classroom-tested, and proven to improve learning across core areas. Author Silvia DeRuvo shows teachers how to engage students during instruction seamlessly using speaking, writing, drawing, movement, and other creative activities, enabling ADHD students to understand the material, retain the knowledge over time, and attain postsecondary education and employment.



Author: Silvia L. DeRuvo

Publisher: Jossey-Bass, 2009

Pages: 176 / Price: \$29.95

Product #: CPEI-09-0211 / ISBN: 978-0-470-24671-9

Web-based Resources



①

① REL West (relwest.wested.org) Visit the new website of WestEd's Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West), a trusted source for research-based knowledge tailored to the needs of education practitioners, administrators, and policymakers.



②

② Doing What Works (dww.ed.gov) Visit for practice guides developed by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences that evaluate research on the effectiveness of educational practices, and for examples of some of the possible ways this research may be used.

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For more information, including sample lessons and research results, visit WestEd.org/mpp.

Authors: Carne Barnett-Clarke & Alma B. Ramírez, with Debra Coggins

Publisher: WestEd, 2010

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Format: Multimedia / Price: \$165

Product #: MPP-09-0111

ISBN: 978-0-914409-58-8

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Format: Multimedia / Price: \$165

Product #: MPP-09-0211

ISBN: 978-0-914409-59-5

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leaders, all community college teachers themselves, to disseminate information on Reading Apprenticeship through introductory workshops at community college campuses across California.

Sam Cargile, Lumina's vice president for grant-making, says Reading Apprenticeship meshes well with foundations' interests in boosting the academic gains of community college students, including low-income and minority students who traditionally have faced barriers to such success. He especially appreciates that Reading Apprenticeship engages community college faculty in a proven intervention across the curriculum. "That immediately resonated on our end," he says. "We wanted to promote an initiative that had the potential to transform institutions in a way that made student success the highest priority."



For more information on how Reading Apprenticeship is helping students transition to and thrive in community college, contact Jane Braunger at 503.880.0339 or jbraung@WestEd.org.

The experience tends to create a strong social network within the classroom, which, in turn, promotes risk taking, builds students' confidence, and helps prepare them for postsecondary work.

