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### **Study lauds value of early warning systems**

At a time when the overall U.S. high school graduation rate is about 75 percent, though much lower in many high-minority and low-income schools, stakeholders are increasingly relying on data-driven, evidence-based student interventions. A new report offers the first national assessment of early warning system use for tracking student outcomes and interventions to prevent dropping out of school.

*On Track for Success*, by Mary Bruce and John Bridgeland of [Civic Enterprises](#), and Joanna Hornig Fox and Robert Balfanz of the [Everyone Graduates Center](#) at [Johns Hopkins University](#), presents an overview of research derived from the work of educators and non-profit groups involved in developing the systems and indicators, as well as best practices in data use and policy recommendations, in 16 communities and school districts in seven states.

"In essence, these systems come down to a seemingly simple action: making a list of the students who are predicted to need support, and acting on the list," the report said. During an [Alliance for Excellent Education](#) panel discussion held last week on the report, Balfanz said the first research on warning systems in the early 2000s was "confirmed and validated" by the new report. He observed that the systems efficiently use "resources we have already" -- data at the school level. But Balfanz also noted that having data "doesn't matter" if schools don't use it to mobilize student interventions.

Early warning systems are an "evolving strategic response [to the high school dropout crisis]. More broadly, EWS are also part of a wider evolution of an education system that is re-inventing itself, and using data along with other tools to move from simply setting standards and hoping students succeed to providing clear pathways to success," the report said.

"The best EWS are characterized by a combination of features that enable rapid identification of students who are in trouble; rapid interventions that are targeted to students' immediate and longer-term need for support, redirection and greater success; the frequent monitoring of the success of interventions; a rapid modification of interventions that are not working; and shared learning from outcomes."

### **Long-term solutions**

In 2010, Civic Enterprises, the Everyone Graduates Center, the Alliance for Excellent Education, and the America's Promise Alliance established the 10-year Grad Nation campaign to address the dropout crisis. Grad Nation's Civic Marshall Plan aims for a 90 percent graduation rate by 2020. According to the report, the Civic Marshall Plan relies on evidence-based measures and practices, and the campaign identified EWS as a critical tool.

Balfanz characterized the primary measurable, "very clear" warning signs of dropping out as "ABC's":

- Attendance, when a student misses 20 days or is absent 10 percent of the time;
- Behavior, when there are two or more infractions; and
- Course performance, when a student cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade, fails English or mathematics in sixth through ninth grades, has a grade-point average of less than 2.0, fails two or more ninth grade courses, or is not promoted on time to tenth grade.

In Texas, the [Michael and Susan Dell Foundation](#) and the SEA funded development of EWS tools using data "they are already entering in their local student information systems," said Kathleen Barfield, executive vice president and chief information officer at [Edvance Research](#), which serves as ED's [Regional Education Laboratory Southwest](#). In San Antonio's [Northside Independent School District](#), data tools used by counselors "improved the drop-out rate significantly" in the past year, Barfield said. "We see a lot of enthusiasm and desire to continue," she added.

As of 2010, 16 states had EWS and more have them in the works, according to Lyndsay Pinkus, policy manager with the [Data Quality Campaign](#) . Pinkus pointed out that EWS development and use facilitates agile movement from research and policy to practice. But "too often [EWS is] viewed as a technical project [that] can be put aside," she said. Pinkus noted the critical non-technical components of clearly defined vision, leadership and collaboration between states and LEAs, and added "this is not overly complicated technical work." To start an EWS, Balfanz said LEAs and districts need a source of raw data that can be put in actionable form with multiple student outcome indicators and a system for tracking what is done in response to the indicators.

Barfield observed that "lots of unused data" is available for EWS use that can link with student interventions to build a body of evidence on what works locally for a particular school or student set -- "A huge opportunity we shouldn't miss."

-- [Jean Gossman](#) covers education research and secondary school reform for LRP Publications.

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