



ENHANCING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT EXPERIENCES

STRATEGIES TO INCREASE THE GRADUATION RATE IN SPOKANE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

PRIORITY SPOKANE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT RESEARCH PROJECT

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Founded in 1887, Gonzaga is an independent, comprehensive university with a distinguished background in the Catholic, Jesuit, and humanistic tradition. Gonzaga emphasizes the moral and ethical implications of learning, living, and working in today's global society. Recently, Gonzaga's Teacher Education Program was given an "exemplary" designation by the State of Washington as a result of our efforts to address changing state standards for pre-service teachers with a focus on collaborative relationships with the local K-12 community.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an update on research conducted by Gonzaga University's School of Education, as funded by Priority Spokane via the Inland Northwest Community Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

For the past two months, the research team at Gonzaga University has been working on the initial phases of the research project. This initial update is organized to provide an overview of the research project, methodology of the study, emerging themes and strategies, and a description of next steps.

The initial phase has laid groundwork for this project, identifying evidence-based practices and programs that positively affect graduation rates. Subsequent work will use these practices as a lens through which to analyze the local context and provide actionable recommendations to the Priority Spokane initiative.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

As a result of the Community Indicators Initiative (CII), developed in 2004 by Eastern Washington University's (EWU) Institute for Policy and Economic Analysis, Priority Spokane was launched to engage community leaders in an effort to identify priorities to address the economic vitality, education, environment, health and community safety of Spokane County.

Out of these efforts, Priority Spokane decided to focus on effective interventions targeting middle school students to dramatically increase graduation rates within the six Spokane Public Schools (SPS) high schools. Priority Spokane framed this research to include a number of components:

1. Identify relevant theories/leverage points as well as evidence-based models that improve graduation rates because of social, health and academic improvements related to the middle school student experience.
2. Identify cost to implement successful models as well as potential sources of revenue.
3. Identify individuals involved in the implementation of the above programs as well as stakeholders, programs and organizations currently interacting with SPS middle school students.

The approach of the Gonzaga University research team includes three distinct, yet overlapping, phases:

Phase 1 has represented the majority of the work so far. It includes the development of a list of strategies and evidence, as well as an analytical framework to evaluate the current situation in Spokane.

Phase 2 will identify specific models/programs that implement the strategies. Included in this process will be an effort to outline costs and potential sources of revenue.

Phase 3 will engage in dialogue with local school-based and community-based stakeholders who work with middle school students. This process will result in a gaps analysis that will answer the question: What is the current state of services for middle school students in Spokane?

In partnership with the stakeholders, the research team will use the identified effective strategies to generate actionable recommendations for evidence-based models/programs that have the potential to positively affect the graduation rate in Spokane.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: THE ISSUE DEFINED

Educational attainment has long been an important part of the fabric of American society. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in a 1787 letter to James Madison; "...above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to: convinced that on their good senses we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty" (Boyd, 1950). Today, this legacy continues as we strive to provide opportunities for millions of children and youth in our communities.

Unfortunately, the promise has not been fully realized. While national dropout rates have dropped slowly over the past 20 years, declining from 14.1 percent to 8.7 percent as of 2007 (US Department of Commerce, 2009), this number still represents a problematic situation for many of our communities. Certain sub-groups such as Hispanic, African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and low-income students continue to disproportionately drop out compared to their respective peer groups (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

There are many negative factors associated with the decision to drop out:

- Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, receive public assistance, go to prison, end upon death row, be unhealthy, and get divorced (Bridgeland, 2006).
- High school dropouts earn \$24,000 on average per year as compared to average earnings of \$40,000 per year for individuals with a high school credential (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2008).
- Dropouts are more likely to receive some type of government assistance and more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison compared to a person with at least a high school diploma (Harlow, 2003).

The negative impact on society of having large numbers of citizens not graduate from high school is clear. When youth from particular communities drop out at disproportionately higher numbers, there is an even greater impact on the economic and social health of a community.

Some reports have placed Washington as low as 43rd nationally with regard to graduation rates (EPE Research Center, 2006). The graph below shows graduation statistics by student group for the class of 2009 in the state of Washington. It paints a troublesome picture regarding high school completion rates statewide and highlights how certain sub-groups underperform other sub-groups.

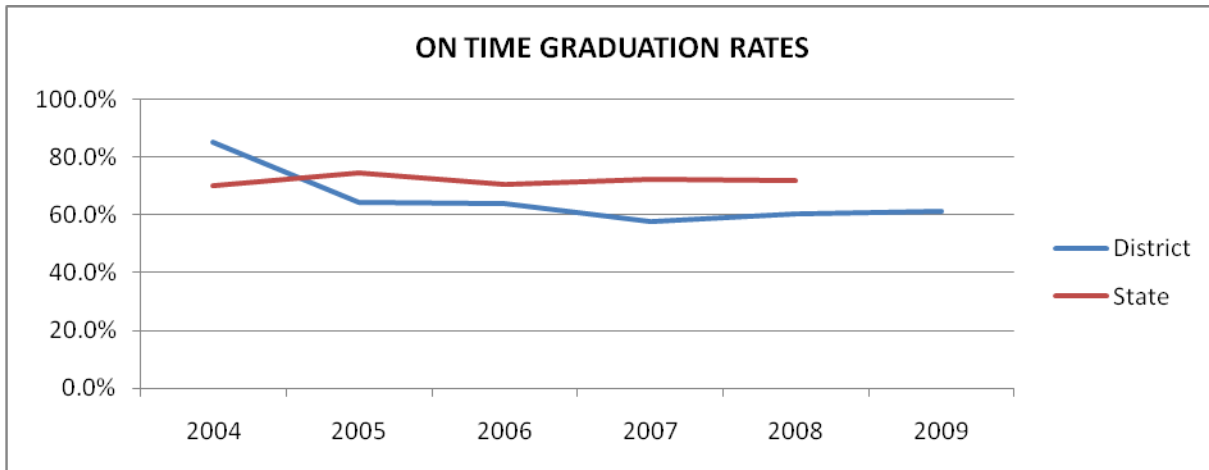
WASHINGTON GRADUATION STATISTICS BY STUDENT GROUP (CLASS OF 2009)

STUDENT GROUP	Received high school diploma	Received adult/IEP diploma	Total graduates	On-time graduation rate	Cumulative dropout rate
All Students	58,512	175	58,687	73.5%	19.4%
American Indian	1,141	2	1,143	52.7%	36.4%
Asian/Pac Islander	5,485	10	5,495	82.2%	12.6%
Asian	5,268	9	5,277	83.6%	11.7%
Pacific Islander	217	1	218	59.8%	27.2%
Black	2,620	11	2,631	63.2%	28.6%
Hispanic	5,599	23	5,622	62.9%	27.3%
White	52,903	125	43,028	76.4%	17.1%
Special Education	3,907	75	3,982	55.6%	24.8%
Limited English	1,129	5	1,134	50.7%	31.9%
Low Income	13,907	69	12,976	62.7%	25.7%
Migrant	785	0	785	64.2%	23.7%
Female	30,484	87	30,571	77.0%	17.35
Male	28,028	88	28,116	70.2%	21.5%

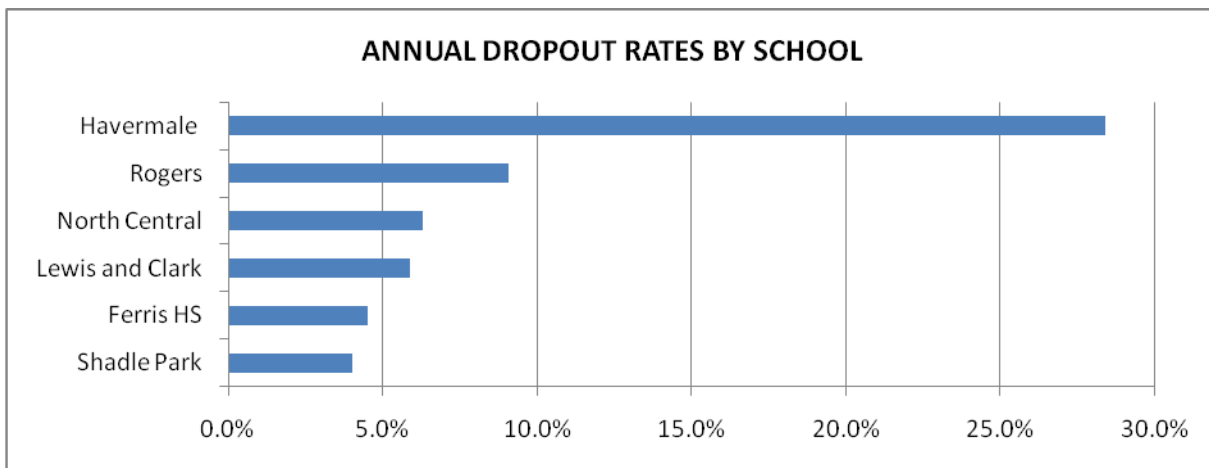
The picture in the Spokane community seems even more problematic. In Spokane, we struggle to keep teens in school. Each year hundreds of high school students leave and do not return.

- On-time graduation rates, as reported by Spokane schools, have fallen from 86 percent in 2004 to a low of 57.7 percent in 2007 and up to 64 percent in 2009.
- One in three students entering the ninth grade does not receive their degree four years later.
- Roughly 5 percent of the students continue working on their degree and complete the requirements by age 21.
- Over the same period the state on-time graduation rate stayed relatively constant in the mid 70 percent range.

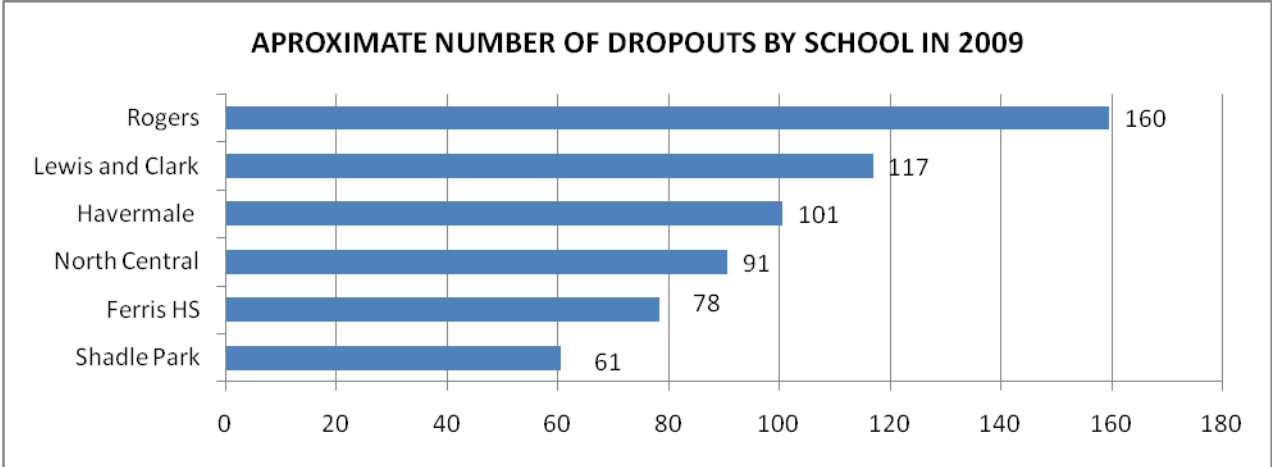
The graph below indicates the percentage of students who graduate four years after entering grade 9 with a regular or adult diploma in both Spokane Public Schools and the state of Washington.



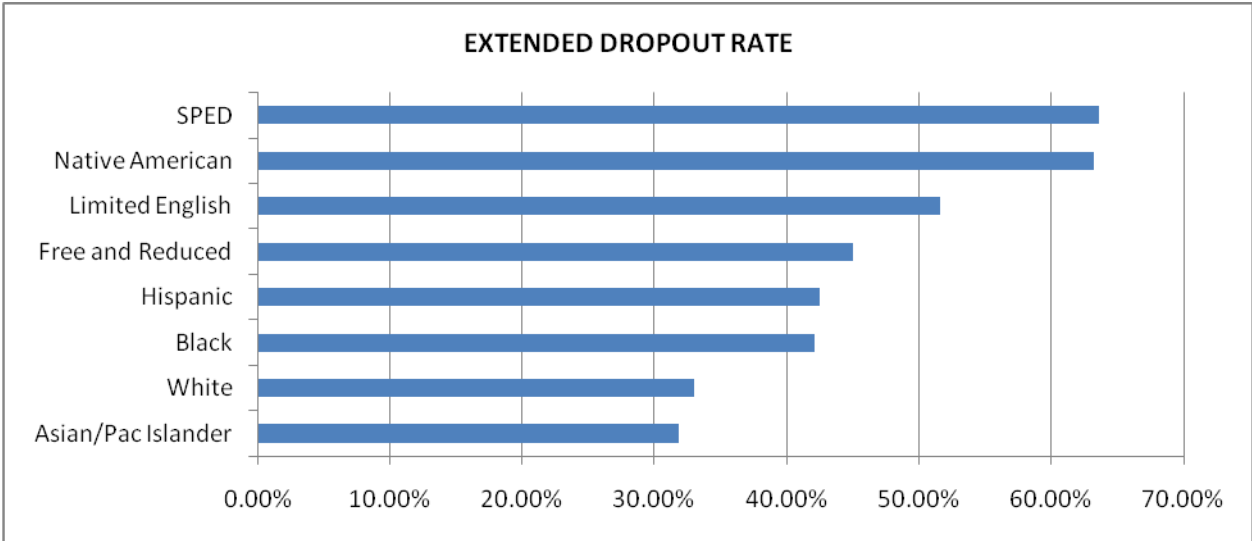
Schools within the Spokane Public Schools district have different rates of degree completion. The graph below shows the annual dropout rates by schools within the district. Most schools have rates in the single digits, with the exception of Havermale, an alternative school working with an at-risk population.

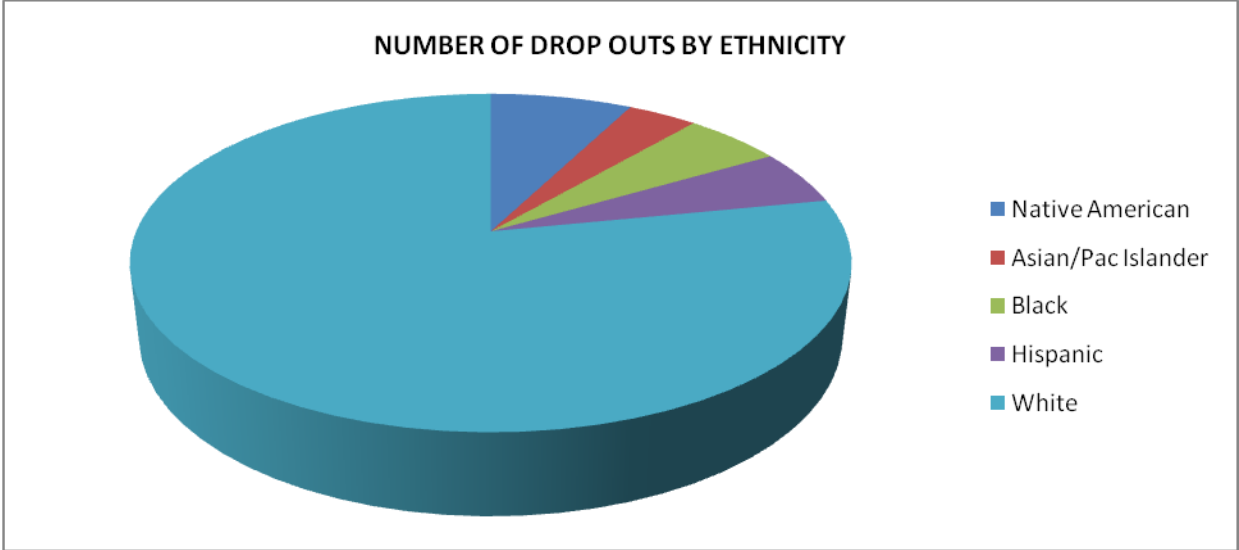


The size of the school is also significant. The next graph indicates the number of drop outs for each school in the district. Note the shift in relative position of Havermale and North Central, whose lower overall populations reduce the number of dropouts accordingly.

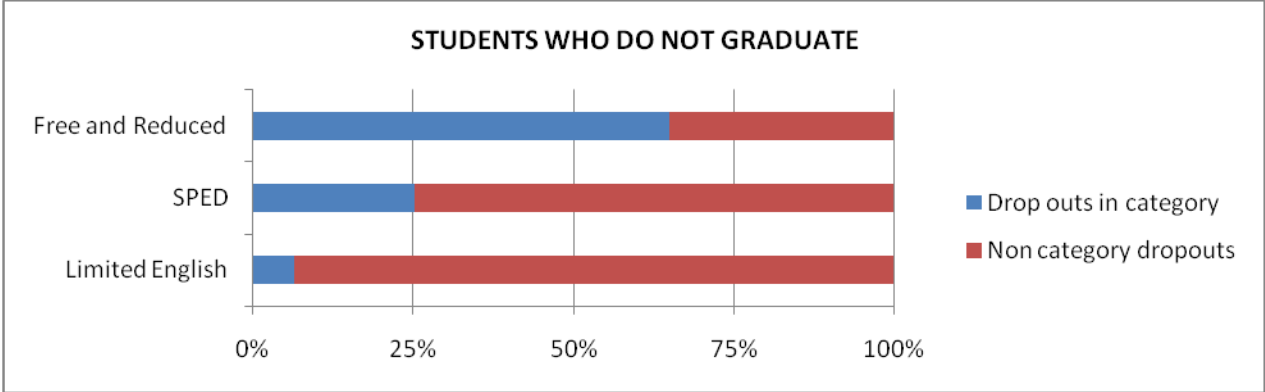


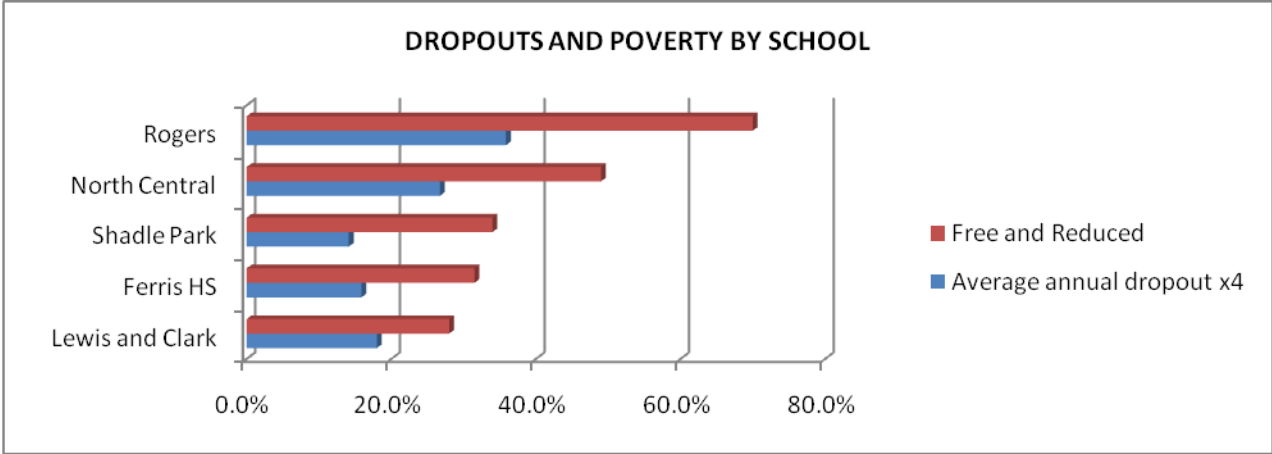
Nationally, demographic factors correlate strongly with the risk of not completing high school. Here in Spokane that correlation is evidenced in the following graph. It is tempting to conclude that the dropout issue in Spokane is largely a Special Education (SPED) and Native American problem. However, as these graphs indicate, while a higher percentage of the minority student populations drop out, the majority of students dropping out of school in Spokane are white.





As seen in the graphs below students with limited English and Special Education students make up relatively few of the total number of students who drop out of Spokane schools, 7 percent and 25 percent respectively, while 63 percent of students who do not gain a diploma qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. The graph below reflects the high percentage of the total population of dropouts that qualify for free and reduced lunch. Furthermore, high school students typically underreport for that program, so this may be an even stronger indicator of who is dropping out of our schools.





EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN SPOKANE

From the preliminary data, it seems that a majority of the students who do not complete high school in the Spokane Public school system are either white and or come from poverty. Other demographic subsets have larger-than-average dropout rates, but are a much smaller percentage of the overall population and therefore do not contribute as many students to the number of students who drop out.

METHODOLOGY

Researching potential solutions to complex problems can be a daunting task. Our research supports particular conclusions or practices over others. However, no solution is proven; rather it has more or better evidential support for implementation than others. Different research designs, while effective in some situations, do not all lead to evidence persuasive enough for broad recommendations.

As a result, the Gonzaga University research team has defined types of studies and ordered them based on how strong the evidence is to recommend reform changes, here in Spokane. The following is a description of those categories in order from weakest to strongest forms of study design.

DESCRIPTION OF TYPES OF RESEARCH

Anecdotal data gathering is specific to an individual's perception. It is a means of building a case for a perspective, documenting and making judgments explicit.

Case study provides a more complete picture of a specific situation. It is useful in illustration of models or giving the reader all relevant, and perhaps some irrelevant data, to interpret.

Correlation Studies are typically done after the fact, gathering large sets of information and looking for relationships among those data. For example: a survey of a large group of teachers about their classroom practices and comparing patterns in that information with how well students perform on standardized tests. This practice is useful in generating support for ideas that are related but it does little to support that the classroom practice causes the growth in achievement.

Pre-Post Comparisons involve assessing students prior to and immediately after being subjected to a specific intervention or program., If growth does occur, then credit for the change is given to the intervention or program. Note that intervening variables could also explain the growth.

Comparison groups often represent the best evidence available in educational practice because an attempt is made to eliminate intervening variables. Comparison groups must be similar on all of the potentially intervening variables i.e. groups of students must be highly similar, teachers must be similar. One group being studied is uses the intervention being studied and one does not (this can also be groups of teachers for comparisons). Once comparison groups are established, growth (or decline) is compared between the groups to determine if the use of the intervention is associated. If student and teacher characteristics have been effectively matched, then there is strong evidence to support the conclusion. But, the intervening variables may not all be known or effectively matched, so the groups

may not be comparable and therefore it may appear to support the conclusion and result in a false positive conclusion.

Randomized Trials attempt to eliminate the potential bias by random assignment to the groups and treatments. If students are randomly assigned to the teachers and teachers are randomly assigned to use the intervention, then it can be argued that all intervening variables have been controlled, assuming enough trials of the experiment are performed. This is rarely the case in education because while the experiences of mice in the lab can be controlled, researchers typically are not able to control and therefore randomize the experiences of children in schools. Parents and students select classes and teachers. Teachers select the use of classroom practice. If the randomization process forces either of these experimental variables, it may create hostile participants and result in bias. Yet this is the best form of evidence available for generalizing the effects of educational reform.

PROPOSED PLAN FOR RESEARCH

Both middle school reform and high school retention have been extensively studied. There are mountains of articles, papers, books and lists of recommendations from many different organizations around the country. The research team enlisted the help of Gonzaga Teacher Education candidates for the initial literature search. A small mountain of documents was delivered as a result.

Having completed and ordered the list of definitions of types of research as listed above, the research team sorted the group of initial studies. Because the scope of this project includes both within school and community-based interventions, the team sorted the studies into three categories: early identification, high academic expectations and social support.

Once organized, the team began studying the groups of research data using the studies in the following ways:

- *Case studies and Anecdotal:* Provided themes and very well-articulated descriptions of practice that could be useful as illustrations and potential areas of future research.
 - List all of the themes identified in the studies
 - Combine ideas across studies (for example academic press may be the same as rigorous study)
- *Correlation studies:* Provided lists of variables, interventions and programs found to be either related or unrelated to student achievement indicators
 - Combine ideas across studies to examine common themes and collapse into a list of related and unrelated or mixed conditions that “cover” the breadth of the recommendations.
- *Pre-post, Comparison and Random studies:* Provided a means of testing the variables identified by correlation studies

The list of related items generated by the correlation studies were compared to the evidence generated in the last, strongest category of research and divided into three piles.

1. Programs and or specific interventions that had tested support, which should be included among the recommendations of this study.
2. Untested but related programs or strategies which should be included as recommendations for future research.
3. Specific interventions or programs that were repeatedly found to be unrelated to factors of student achievement these should be eliminated as recommended areas of focus.

Having completed the independent research process, the team found that there is considerable unity in the field on recommended strategies and programs. Indeed, findings of this research team were highly similar to the findings of other larger teams who had done similar studies only with much larger budgets and more time to accomplish their task. Given the similar findings, it would be remiss not to have these studies inform this report.

OVERVIEW OF NATIONAL RESEARCH ON BEST PRACTICES

There have been a number of comprehensive reports published with recommendations and evidence-based practices for decreasing the dropout rate. This research team discovered a great deal of unity among their recommendations and those of these prominent reports. Here is a brief overview of the leaders in the field and the studies they have released:

Institute of Education Sciences (IES)

The Institute on Education Sciences published their *Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention* in 2008 (Dynarski). The guide includes six specific recommendations for dropout prevention and the level of evidence that exists to support them. They base their recommendations in the rigorous evidence standards of the U.S. Department of Education's *What Works Clearinghouse*, a database of evidence-based educational practices. The researchers identified key components of individual interventions to determine which features were common to multiple successful interventions. Their recommendations include developing data systems that realistically diagnose the number of students who drop out and that identify those at high risk of dropping out, assigning adult advocates, and increasing the relevance and rigor of instruction and providing individualized support to meet the new challenges.

Silent Epidemic

This publication, prepared for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates, looks at why students drop out and what might have kept them in school (Bridgeland, 2006). The researchers conducted a series of focus groups and a survey with 467 racially and ethnically diverse 16-to-25 year-olds who identified as having dropped out of school. Based on their findings they developed their *10-Point Plan to Address America's Silent Epidemic*. Their recommendations include: supporting accurate drop out data, establishing early warning systems, providing adult advocates for struggling students, supporting parental engagement, establishing rigorous academic expectations and individualized support to meet those higher standards. For the complete 10-Point Plan, see the Appendix I.

National Education Association

The National Education Association created a *12-Point Action Plan for Reducing the School Dropout Rate* (National Education Association). They advocate for ensuring that students receive individualized attention, increasing career education and work force readiness programs, intervening early in the lives

of students determined to be at risk of dropping out, involving families in learning at school and at home, and involving the entire community in dropout prevention. For the complete 12-Point Plan, see Appendix II.

America's Promise Alliance

This organization, a national network of over 260 organizations, is dedicated to improving the lives of the nation's youth by providing them with what they call the *Five Promises*: caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education, and opportunities to help others. Their research, *Every Child, Every Promise* (America's Promise Alliance, 2009) shows strong correlation between children who experience these promises and their ability to become successful adults. The Alliance has focused their work specifically on ending the school dropout crisis. They support three high-level strategies for providing the wraparound supports young people need to succeed in school:

1. *Where the Kids Are*: Using schools as hubs for year-round school and community supports for at risk youth
2. *Ready for the Real World*: Service learning and career exploration for middle school students and
3. *All Kids Covered*: Working to enroll all eligible children in available health insurance programs.

In the spring of 2009, they commissioned the report, *Grad Nation: A Guide Book to Help Communities Tackle the Dropout Crisis* (Balfanz). The report offers local leaders abundant resources for developing a plan to address their community's unique dropout problem.

United Way of America

In pursuit of its 10 year goal to cut the national dropout rate in half, the United Way of America released its *Mobilization Plan Blueprint for Increasing High School Graduation Rates* in 2009. This publication provides a guide for local chapters to follow when trying to impact their community's dropout rate. They identify four high level strategies for dropout prevention:

1. Identify students at risk of dropping out and connect them with the resources they need;
2. Engage students in learning;
3. Support families to improve academic achievement;
4. Leverage community supports and systems.

Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University

Starting in 1996-97 school year, Robert Balfanz and his research team performed an eight year longitudinal study on a cohort of nearly 13,000 Philadelphia sixth graders. Their research yielded four

highly predictive warning flags. If a sixth grade student experienced any of the following variables they were at least 75 percent likely not to graduate on time or within one year of their class: Attend school 80 percent or less of the time, fail math in sixth grade, fail English in sixth grade, or receive unsatisfactory final behavior mark.

Based on these findings and their evaluation of the talent development middle grades reform model, they suggest a tiered intervention system focusing on attendance, behavior, and course performance. Certain interventions should be offered school wide, about 15-20 percent of the students should receive targeted interventions, and the most intensive interventions should be reserved for the 5-10 percent of the school most at risk of dropping out (Balfanz, et al., 2007).

National Dropout Prevention Center/ Networks, Clemson University

The NDPC/N distilled the findings of their extensive research of the school dropout problem into *15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention*. They also offer many resources for implementation of these strategies including the *Model Programs Database*, featuring intervention programs and the level of evidence supporting their effectiveness in dropout prevention. Their strategies include: school-community collaboration, safe learning environments, family engagement, mentoring/ tutoring, service-learning, alternative schooling, after-school opportunities, professional development for teachers, active-learning, individualized instruction and career and technology education. For complete list, see Appendix III.

In December of 2008, the NDPC/N co-authored a report commissioned by the Texas Legislature entitled *Best Practices for Dropout Prevention*. For the report the 18-person research team conducted an extensive literature review of dropout prevention programs and classified the programs into a three-tiered system based on the level of evidence. They offered recommendations for programs with the best chance of replication in Texas and the components of those programs that were linked to success.

Other Resources for Finding Evidence-Based Practices for Dropout Prevention

In addition to the two databases mentioned above, the *What Works Clearinghouse* and the NDPC/N's *Model Programs Database*, the *RAND Promising Practices Network* and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMSHA) *National Registry for Evidence-based Programs and Practices* also provide comprehensive lists of prevention programs that have been rigorously evaluated.

The following table summarizes the areas of unity between these national reports and the recommendations that have emerged from the independent research of the team during this phase of the project.

AREAS OF UNITY

RECOMMENDATIONS	America's Promise	IES	NDPC/N	Silent Epidemic	United Way	Everyone Graduates	NEA
Early Warning System (5)		X		X	X	X	X
Student Engagement (7)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Professional Development (2)			X				X
Mentoring/Advocate (4)	X	X	X	X			
Family Engagement (4)				X	X	X	X
Supportive Environment (2)	X		X				
Community Collaboration (3)			X		X		X

EMERGING THEMES AND STRATEGIES

The Priority Spokane RFP begins with the following task for the research project: “Identify relevant theories/leverage points regarding the health, social and academic issues related to middle school students.” This is the area in which this first written update is focused.

As a result of the literature review, three consistent themes and strategies emerged.

1. Early Identification
2. High Academic Expectation
3. Social Support

Each has a number of recommended strategies for working with school-age children. Below we offer a description and an exemplar program/model.

The next phase of the research will focus on the identification of evidence-based programs/models that employ these research-based strategies.

Note: Different terms are used in different circles around the same topic. For the purposes of this project, we chose terms that are consistent with those used in the research, in the field, and that are best understandable by a broad audience.

EARLY IDENTIFICATION

A critical part of any intervention model is correctly identifying the population which can benefit from the program. If students are misidentified, then resources are misspent. The literature strongly recommends the development of an early warning system that accurately identifies students who are critically off the track to on-time graduation.

Recent research indicates that issues leading to dropping out in high school can surface as early as elementary school (Balfanz, 2007; Jerald, 2006). These studies stress the importance of early identification and intervention, making accurate identification a particularly difficult task. Some of the most credible data cites the importance of targeting intervention beginning in the sixth grade. Given the time span between these early experiences and the action of dropping out, it is clear that early identification is critical. The difficulty is what factors can be used to identify the eventual drop outs and when should they be applied.

Historically, the profession has looked for indicators of being at risk of not graduating and identified certain racial or ethnic groups. However, studies have shown that it may be more important to study

differences within these groups than differences between racial or ethnic groups (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2009). While some demographic factors are still critical to the question of who is dropping out, there are specific behaviors or events that lead to a much greater likelihood of being off the track to on-time graduation.

The studies clearly indicate that academic success in key areas, rate of absence and misbehavior are tightly linked to propensity to drop out (Balfanz, Herzog & Mac Iver, 2007) (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989) (Lloyd, 1974) (Morris, Ehren & Lenz, 1991). Balfanz found that sixth graders are most likely to develop off-track behaviors and that those the same behaviors developed after sixth grade were not as powerful in predicting eventual drop outs.

It seems that sixth graders who develop academic and behavioral problems do not self correct. Students who eventually fall entirely off track typically display one or more warning flags in the sixth grade: failing either English or math, attendance less than 80 percent or a mark of unsatisfactory behavior on their report card. Further Balfanz model was useful in identifying 60 percent of the eventual drop outs in high school. The study found that students with no flags graduated at a rate of 56 percent, students with one flag graduated at a rate of 21 percent, two flags graduated at a rate of 13 percent and student with three flags graduated at a rate of 7 percent.

While these three flags were useful in predicting the population of students who would eventually drop out in Balfanz's study, the literature also warns against generalizing of those findings. It seems that much variation can occur between school communities. Jerald (2006) warns that school systems may be tempted to skip the development of an accurate Early Warning System but such decisions will have negative consequences. A large school system that invests in better data to support dropout prevention can obtain much better results for hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars less than a similar system whose leaders decided to skip that step. But before an Early Warning System can be implemented the school leadership must understand the specific issues facing drop outs in that community.

While there are real differences in how different students get off track to graduation, there are also common patterns that can be useful in predicting drop outs. The influences experienced by youth vary from community to community. It is common to find subgroups within the community that react differently to actions or events. The graph below indicates the findings of Rameriz and Carpenter's longitudinal study of a specific community.

SIGNIFICANT VARIABLES RELATED TO DROPPING OUT BY GROUP

	WHITES	BLACKS	HISPANICS
↓ decrease drop out behavior			
↑ increase drop out behavior			
— not a significant factor			
Two parent family	↓	—	↓
Time spent on homework	↓	—	↓
Units of Algebra 1	—	—	↓
Parent involvement	↓	↓	—
Higher tenth grade math score	↓	—	—
Hours of extracurricular activities	↓	—	—
More minority students in school	↑	—	—
Other siblings who have dropped out	↑	—	—
Gang activity in school	↑	—	—
Participated in ESL	—	↑	—
Ever in a dropout prevention program	—	—	↑
Gender (female)	↑	—	↑
Has been held back	↑	↑	↑
Number of times suspended	↑	↑	↑

Both Balfanz and Jerald agree that to fully understand what is happening in schools, a longitudinal study should be undertaken to uncover the patterns leading to drop out within the community. The literature recommends a two-phase process:

1. *Research*: conducting a cohort-based longitudinal study aimed at identifying risk factors for a given school system, identifying patterns in how the risk factors play out in the lives of students, and developing the means to measure the impact on schools.
2. *Development*: Leveraging the knowledge gained in phase 1 to create an Early Warning System that accurately predicts students at risk of dropping out, suggests possible intervention strategies, and provides useful data to track and inform the process.

A longitudinal study should be undertaken in the Spokane community to uncover the patterns followed by students. These patterns can be used to better understand the drop out crisis facing our community schools, accurately predict students most in need of intervention and help determine the specific intervention necessary. The same system, once developed, can be used to track and provide formative assessments of progress toward increasing the number of students who graduate on-time. It is clear that understanding the specific patterns of students who get off the track to on time graduation in

Spokane Public Schools through a longitudinal study will begin helping students complete this critical step in their future.

HIGH ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

The notion of high academic expectations for all students is prevalent in many of the school reform research, as well as the characteristics of effective schools research. While there are different interpretations of this concept, there is broad agreement with the notion that schools and communities should structure opportunities so that all students have meaningful academic experiences that are accompanied by high expectations.

At the outset of this research project, one of the focused areas (or domains, as described in our proposal) was school reform. Many of the strategies listed below emerged from the research in this area. Additionally, the research we reviewed in the area of out-of-school interventions (another domain in our proposal) also focused specifically on academic enrichment strategies that were conducted outside of the regular school schedule and potentially outside of the regular school site.

For the purpose of this project, the emergent strategies outlined below focus on high academic expectations in the following areas:

1. Extended Learning Opportunities (Saturday, summer, after school)
2. Student Engagement
3. Professional Development
4. Academic Enrichment

Each of these strategies will be discussed briefly with a sample program/model that is designed to support the included strategy.

Extended Learning Opportunities

The notion of providing extended learning opportunities (ELOs) is anchored in both social support and academic achievement. For the purpose of this section, the focus is narrowed to academic achievement. Many of the school reform efforts and dropout prevention initiatives focus on maximizing contact time with students to support academic achievement through the employment of ELOs given that students spend roughly 80 percent of their time outside of the traditional school day.

ELOs include after school, summer learning, extended day, and extended year programs. ELOs have the potential to support rigor in the classroom, increase the relevance of academic content to students, and establish supportive relationships between students and caring adults (NGA, 2009). The National Governors Association's Center for Best Practices suggests that ELOs have the increased likelihood of

reducing dropout rates by ensuring the following approaches: Identify likely dropouts early and provide targeted intervention through ELOs; increase access to and the availability of ELOs for students at risk of dropping out; establish systems to ensure ELOs are effective and are tied to dropout reduction goals (NGA, 2009).

These recommendations align well with the above information on the importance of an Early Warning System as this system would be able to inform the work and participation of student in ELO environments.

Student Engagement

The next strategy/theory/leverage point for academic achievement is student engagement. That students are disengaged is one helpful, if simplistic, way to interpret *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, a report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This study found that “Nearly half (47 percent) said a major reason for dropping out was that classes were not interesting. Nearly 7 in 10 respondents (69 percent) said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard...two-thirds would have worked harder if more was demanded of them (higher academic standards and more studying and homework)” (Bridgeland, Et Al; 2006, p iii). The strategies presented here are aligned with the recommendations from the effective strategies work that has been done by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network to address this issue of student engagement:

1. Service Learning
2. Active Learning
3. Career and Technical Education (CTE)
4. Educational Technology
5. Individual Instruction (Mentoring/Tutoring)

As schools look to increase levels of student engagement, the above strategies represent an important set of strategies that should be included in any school improvement process.

Professional Development

While listed independently, it is clear that professional development is a critical component to all of the strategies being outlined in our project. It is clear that Spokane Public Schools is staffed by a talented pool of teachers and administrators. It is this group that will have the largest impact on the lives of students in the school setting. It is important, and supported by the research, however, that these school communities continue to provide opportunities for personnel to develop skills and techniques and the capacity to learn and deliver on innovated strategies. With this in mind, concentrated professional development targeting the outlined strategies will lead to improved graduation rates.

Academic Enrichment

The above recommendations align with academically enriching school reform templates proposed by key studies such as: *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006); *This We Believe: Successful Middle Schools for Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2010); *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Carnegie Corporation, 2000). These templates help to serve as an important guide to the development of high quality academic experiences for all middle school students in Spokane Public Schools.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Most young people who are struggling academically are facing other barriers to educational attainment as well. In order to keep students in school, their social, economic and family needs, as well as their academic needs, must be met. The following section reviews some promising strategies for providing comprehensive support services to care for the whole child.

1. Mentoring
2. Family Engagement
3. Safe and Supportive Environment
4. Middle-to-High School Transition Programs
5. School-Community Collaborations

Mentoring

Mentoring appears in many different forms but the common thread is a meaningful and sustained relationship with a well-trained and caring adult. Nearly every major report on dropout prevention highlights the need for individualized attention for those students most at-risk of dropping out (Bridgeland, 2006; Smink & Reimer, 2005; America's Promise Alliance; Balfanz, 2009). Whether it is in school or out of school, a relationship with a caring adult has the power to change the negative cycles of the mentee, including their risk of leaving school.

A number of studies have indicated significant associations between a youth's involvement in a mentoring relationship and positive developmental outcomes, such as a reduction in substance use and violent behavior, increased academic performance, improved self-esteem, greater school connectedness and stronger relationships with parents and peers (Dubois & Karcher, 2005; Rhodes, 2002; McLearn 1998; Tierney & Grossman, 1995). A recent investigation with data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that adolescents first assessed in grades 7-12 who reported having experienced a mentoring relationship exhibited better outcomes within the domains of education/work (high school completion, college attendance, employment), mental health (self-esteem,

life satisfaction), problem behavior (gang membership, physical fighting, risk taking) and health (exercise, birth control) (Dubois & Silverton, 2005).

One promising form of mentoring is the assignment of an in-school adult advocate to students determined to be at high risk of dropping out of school. The Institute for Education Science (IES) included this as one of their six evidence-based intervention strategies for dropout prevention. According to the *IES Practice Guide* (2009), the adult should be responsible for addressing both academic and personal needs, communicating with the families and advocating for the student. In three rigorously evaluated interventions, that included intensive meetings with an adult advocate, the advocates played an important role in promoting school engagement, by giving students opportunities to develop a sense of belonging at school and by providing accountability for academic and behavioral progress. Students in the treatment groups of the interventions showed promising improvement in outcomes related to drop out prevention.

Family Engagement

In the report the *Silent Epidemic* (2006) 59 percent of school drop outs surveyed felt their parents were involved in their education and only 21 percent described them as “very involved.” Sixty-eight percent of the respondents said their parents only became more involved when they realized their student was on the verge of dropping out.

A deep research base has indicated that family involvement in a child’s education positively effects academic achievement. (Henderson & Mapp 2002; Mo, 2008). This remains true across socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and parental educational backgrounds for students of all ages (Mapp, 2004). At the end of April 2010 the U.S. engaged in a hearing on the Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Reauthorization Act. Anne Henderson, a senior consultant at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, advised legislators to include family engagement in ESEA reauthorization. “Engaging low income and non-traditional families will raise student achievement, lower the dropout rate and help close the achievement gap,” she said. “Despite all this evidence, family engagement is a low priority, and schools are struggling how to do it. Teachers are saying this is the number one barrier, where they feel least prepared.” (Wolfe, 2010).

Increasing the involvement of the parents of struggling students will be a key to preventing drop out. It is essential that the barriers preventing parents from becoming more involved in their child’s education be mitigated. The National Parent Teacher Association uses a model to help schools reshape how they look at parent and family engagement based on *Epstein’s Framework of Six Types of Involvement* (Epstein, 1997).

1. *Communicating*: Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
2. *Parenting*: Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.
3. *Student Learning*: Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.

4. *Volunteering*: Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.
5. *School Decision Making and Advocacy*: Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
6. *Collaborating with Community*: Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

Safe and Supportive Environment

To keep students in school, the schools must be a place where they feel safe and supported. Violence, whether physical or emotional, is becoming increasingly part of the fabric of students' school experience. The Educational Development Center (1996) found that only half the youth felt safe in school and that approximately 160,000 children miss school each day because they feel physical harm. Social bullying is no less harmful, as tragically evidenced by recent cases in the news.

It is important for schools to create an environment that does not tolerate bullying, harassment or terrorism and one that emphasizes academic achievement, high standards and positive relationships between staff and students. This certainly involves having in place a comprehensive violence prevention plan. However, it could also include teaching students the interpersonal skills needed to deal with conflict in an appropriate way. These interventions may result in the following benefits to the school and students:

1. Lowering rates of delinquency, disruptive behaviors, harassment, bullying, suicide, and all other forms of violent and anti-social behavior
2. Increasing the likelihood that troubled youth will be identified and receive treatment
3. Improving the learning environment by reducing intimidating, disruptive and disrespectful behavior (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2009).

Middle School to High School Transition Programs

Transitions represent a vulnerable time, particularly for middle school aged youth. The move from a smaller more personalized middle school to a larger, more complex high school environment can accelerate the beginnings of disengagement from school. The high school dropout crisis is especially acute in between the ninth and the tenth grade. More students fail the ninth grade than any other and in high schools with large low-income populations, as many as 40 percent of students drop out after ninth grade (Cohen, 2009).

Initial research indicates that comprehensive programs, those involving teachers, parents and students in the transition from middle to high school have a positive effect on student retention and experience. Those programs that only target a single aspect of the transition displayed no independent effect on retention (Smith, 1997). Promising practices in transition programs include: parental involvement, on-

going academic and social support, beginning in the middle school and continuing into high school, shadowing and other visitation opportunities; interactions with positive older students.

In addition, schools that provide summer programs designed for students who need extra academic support before entering high school are more successful in lowering course failures and dropout rates (Cohen, 2009). SummerBridge is one such program offered in many places across the United States. SummerBridge, offers incoming ninth grade students enriching summer programming with an emphasis on academic support, advancement and motivation to excel in high school. Thoughtful and well-implemented transition programs can help students experience a more stable and confident start to their high school years.

School-Community Collaboration

The response to the drop out crisis cannot fall on the shoulders of the schools alone. To keep students in school, their social, economic and family needs, as well as their academic needs, must be met. True school-community collaboration involves the mobilization of the resources of the entire community including business, social services, places of worship, libraries, museums etc to meet the needs of students. Connecting community resources youth in need of extra support allows educators to focus their energy on the academics needs of the students. The idea of using the schools as a hub for year-round school and community supports for at risk youth is reflected in the America's Promise Alliance National Action Strategies, *Where the Kids Are*. The Obama administration also strongly advocates for these "community schools" and seeks to foster the partnerships between schools and local agencies (Butler, 2010)

Research on the effects of these school-community collaborations is ongoing. One major study, performed by ICF, *International on Communities in Schools (CIS)*, has indicated some promising initial findings (2008). CIS is an in-school program that uses a case management model to provide students with the services they need to stay in school, increase attendance, reduce behavior issues, improve academically, and graduate. After comparing 600 CIS schools to 600 non-CIS schools, the concluded that: 1) CIS is one of a very few dropout prevention programs proven to keep students in school and the only one to increase graduation rates 2) When implemented with high fidelity, the CIS Model results in a higher percentage of students reaching proficiency in fourth- and eighth- grade reading and math 3) implementation of the CIS model correlates more strongly with school-wide outcomes than does the uncoordinated provision of service alone. They are currently in the process of completing an even more rigorous student-level evaluation on the effects of the program model.

NEXT STEPS

The first phase of this project has generated an emerging, theoretical list of leverage points, or strategies, and model/program examples that have a strong record of improving graduation rates. This list, which will continue to evolve and become more robust as we move forward, will serve as an analytical lens through which we will evaluate the local situation. In particular, the focus will be narrowed such that specific programs and models that deliver on the theories/leverage points/strategies will be identified, with the cost aligned to potential sources of revenue where possible, and considered as recommended modes for Spokane.

As the project has progressed, the necessity for a collaborative perspective has been reinforced. There is great interest in the Spokane community to address the issue of education attainment. Parallel activities have and continue to take place: SPS board recently passed resolution calling for the appointment of an advisory committee to engage in a comprehensive middle school study; Chase Youth Commission Regional Summit on Dropout Prevention; Children's Investment Fund Initiative; Youth Indicators work being done by the Spokane County Health District. These efforts reflect the importance our community is assigning to this issue.

Throughout this process, and even as part of the development of our initial proposal, there has been dialogue with key stakeholders. This will continue as the project moves forward. In the coming weeks, the researchers will engage constituent focus groups in gap analysis using the theories/leverage points/strategies. The local context will be explored as an important variable. We intend to include key Spokane Public School District personnel, government agency personnel and community partner personnel to participate in these focus groups. This "ground truth", as it is known in the natural and earth sciences, will provides a picture of the local activities that are currently underway as well as opportunities for further implementation of the outlined recommendations.

Furthermore, following consultation with program officers at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, research staff will be visiting sites in Seattle, Portland and Boise that have engaged in some of these reform strategies to evaluate implementation strategies that could be inform the efforts here in Spokane.

Recommendations emerging from this evidence-based, academic research will soon be linked to both the field experience of education in middle schools and the activities of various community agencies working to provide social, health, and academic support to middle school aged youth. We can take bold and effective action to enhance middle school student experiences and dramatically increase graduation rates within our six Spokane public high schools.

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10-POINT PLAN TO ADDRESS AMERICA'S SILENT EPIDEMIC (2007)

1. Support accurate graduation and drop out data
2. Establish early warning systems to support struggling students
3. Provide adult advocates and student supports
4. Support parental engagement and individualized graduation plans
5. Establish a rigorous college- and work-preparedness curriculum for high schools.
6. Provide supportive options for struggling students to meet rigorous expectations
7. Raise compulsory school age requirements under state law
8. Expand college-level learning environments in high schools
9. Focus the research and disseminate best practices
10. Make increasing graduation and college/workforce preparedness a national priority

NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION'S 12-POINT PLAN FOR REDUCING THE SCHOOL DROPOUT CRISIS

1. Mandate high school graduation or equivalency as compulsory for everyone before the age of 21
1. Establish high school graduations centers for students aged 19-21
2. Make sure students receive individualized attention
3. Expand students' graduation options
4. Increase career education and workforce readiness programs in school
5. Act early so students do not depart from school
6. Involve families in learning at school and at home
7. Monitor students' academic progress in school
8. Monitor, accurately report and work to reduce dropout rates
9. Involve the entire community in dropout prevention
10. Make sure that educators have the training and resources they need to prevent students from dropping out
11. Make high school graduation a federal priority

NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER/NETWORK'S 15 EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION

1. Systemic Renewal
2. School- Community Collaboration
3. Safe Learning Environments
4. Family Engagement
5. Early Childhood Education
6. Early Literacy Development
7. Mentoring/ Tutoring
8. Service-Learning
9. Alternative Schooling
10. After-School Opportunities
11. Professional Development
12. Active-Learning
13. Educational Technology
14. Individualized Instruction
15. Career and Technology Education

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