

Dropout Prevention The Safe & Civil Schools Approach



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IES Practice Guide: Dropout Prevention

How strategies embodied in the Safe & Civil Schools approach align with the recommendations outlined in this guide.

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) was established by law in 2002 as a branch of the U.S. Department of Education with the specific purpose of providing "rigorous evidence on which to ground education practice and policy" ([IES, 2009](#)). In this role, the IES occasionally publishes practice guides designed to inform educators about effective evidence-based educational practices.

In September 2008, the IES released a practice guide, Dropout Prevention, intended for educators and administrators in secondary schools, superintendents, school boards, and state policy makers. The guide offers six recommendations for developing and implementing policies and procedures to retain students in schools through graduation, thus better preparing the nation's students to assume adult roles in society, and as a corollary, increasing graduation rates and reducing dropout rates. The authors present each recommendation with supporting evidence of effectiveness, suggested implementation practices, potential obstacles, and evidence ratings.

The purpose of this article is to show how the Safe & Civil Schools model incorporates these six recommendations.

Recommendation 1

Utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify individual students at risk of dropping out.

In this recommendation, the authors caution against using generic dropout prevention programs without first assessing the gravity of the

problem and identifying specific students who are most at risk of dropping out. Instead, they maintain that school and district staffs should collect and analyze data to match dropout interventions to “the characteristics, climate, and practices of the school and its students who are at risk of dropping out” (p. 12).

The authors identify four indicators that schools might take into account in determining which students are most at risk of dropping out:

- ✧ High rates of absenteeism
- ✧ Grade retention
- ✧ Low academic achievement
- ✧ High incidents of misbehavior

How this recommendation aligns with the *Safe & Civil Schools* model

Safe & Civil Schools has long advocated the use of data in the decision-making process. For more than twenty years, materials from *Safe & Civil Schools* have included a variety of measures that school staffs can use to record student data. Witness Dr. Randy Sprick’s *Discipline in the Secondary Classroom: A Problem-by-Problem Survival Guide* published in 1985. In this book, Randy guides teachers in designing and using an efficient system for monitoring and recording daily classroom behavior with a Weekly Record Sheet.

Over the years, all materials and training developed by *Safe & Civil Schools* stress the importance of using a variety of data collection methods in making informed decisions regarding any intervention or improvement effort used in a school.

For instance, in *Foundations: Establishing Positive Discipline Policies*, the authors devote an entire chapter to making data-based decisions. And in the latest edition of *CHAMPS: A Proactive & Positive Approach to Classroom Management*, there are more than 50 forms teachers can tailor to record misbehavior, conduct surveys, assess interventions, observe interactions, and evaluate the success of their overall classroom management plans.

Basing decisions on data collected from such instruments as surveys, observations, incident reports, and school records (attendance, tardiness, referrals, suspensions, expulsions, etc.) has always been, and will continue to be, a primary principle of the *Safe & Civil Schools* model.

Recommendation 2

Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.

This recommendation is based on research suggesting that students benefit from having at least one significant adult in their lives who can offer them affection, encouragement, and support. Students who have “ongoing relationships with adults feel a greater sense of school membership, attachment, and involvement” (p. 17).


The authors recommend that schools assign carefully chosen and matched adult advocates to those students at risk of dropping out. Advocates would meet with their students frequently and consistently to help them overcome obstacles to academic, emotional, and social success.

By building a caring and trusting relationship with their students, advocates serve to connect students to school, helping them feel more comfortable and successful in that environment and thus, less likely to leave.

How this recommendation aligns with the *Safe & Civil Schools* model

One of the driving tenets of the *Safe & Civil Schools* model is, “Build positive, personal relationships with students.”

As early as 1985, Randy promoted the use of adult advocates for students at risk of school failure in *Discipline in the Secondary Classroom*. There he encouraged building administrators to seek volunteer teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school personnel to serve as a “special counselor, student advocate, and support person” (Sprick, 1985, p. 67) in a schoolwide plan to help high-risk students.



Since then, numerous researchers have reiterated the importance of these positive, supportive relationships in connecting students to schools and keeping them there until graduation. One of these is Dr. Robert W. Blum, author of “A Case for School Connectedness” published in *Educational Leadership*, April 2005 and featured in our [Summer 2006 newsletter](#).

In *Behavioral Response to Intervention*, published in 2009, Randy again recognizes the important role that an adult advocate, or mentor, can play in the life of a student at risk of dropping out and offers guidance and suggestions to school staffs for implementing mentorship programs. He introduces the topic in *Foundations* as well.

In fact, every *Safe & Civil Schools* book, program, and professional development activity assists educators in creating positive relationships with students—especially students at risk—in an effort to enhance that sense of connection and belonging that encourages a student to remain in school.

Recommendation 3

Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.

Research indicates that low academic performance, absenteeism, and grade retention are indicators of students at risk of dropping out. Hence, providing additional academic support in the form of tutoring, extended school hours, and more personalized instruction seems a logical move in stemming the dropout rate.

How this recommendation aligns with the *Safe & Civil Schools* model

The *Safe & Civil Schools* model, by and large, does not address the issue of low academic performance directly. Inherent in the model, however, is the belief that academics cannot exist devoid of behavior. Rather, academic achievement and inappropriate behavior are inversely related—i.e., academic achievement increases as inappropriate behavior decreases. As the primary goal of the *Safe & Civil Schools* model is to decrease misbehavior and increase

responsible behavior, it can be inferred that by employing the model, a school staff would be helping students academically as well.

Furthermore, by reducing inappropriate behavior, educators can devote less time to managing student behavior and more time to teaching, which in turn can influence the academic success of students.

Recommendation 4

Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills.

This recommendation stems from research that indicates a strong relationship between disruptive behavior and dropping out (see footnote 54 in report). These findings imply that successful dropout interventions will incorporate strategies to help students learn behavior management and social skills.

As in Recommendation 2, this recommendation also refers to the importance of matching adult advocates with students at risk of failure. With support and encouragement, adult advocates can help a student establish and attain behavioral goals.

How this recommendation aligns with the *Safe & Civil Schools* model

The *Safe & Civil Schools* approach encompasses three basic properties—every strategy or method espoused is proactive, positive, and instructional. We focus on “instructional” in aligning with this recommendation.

All *Safe & Civil Schools* materials and services are based on the belief that expectations for student behavior in all school settings should be clear, consistent, equitable, and *directly taught to students*. In other words, educators who want to actually reach the students they teach will take the time to instruct their students on the social and emotional behavior they expect to see in school. This means developing lesson plans, modeling the appropriate behavior in the lesson, and allowing ample time for all students to practice the behavior. Lessons should be followed with positive reinforcement



when students display the appropriate behavior and calm, consistent correction when students do not.

Recommendation 5

Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.

This recommendation touches on the alienation that many students feel in large, amorphous schools. The authors offer several methods for overcoming this sense of isolation:

- ✧ Establish small learning communities.
- ✧ Employ team teaching.
- ✧ Create smaller classes.
- ✧ Extend classroom time.
- ✧ Encourage student participation in extracurricular activities.

All of these models ensure that students have greater access to their teachers, which in turn allows teachers time to know their students to better motivate, support, and foster the academic and behavioral skills that facilitate school success.

In addition, more personalized learning environments allow teachers to be more creative and innovative with their teaching styles and curriculum choices, thereby engaging students more readily.

How this recommendation aligns with the *Safe & Civil Schools* model

On the surface, all of the methods suggested by the authors for this recommendation are designed to give students more time with their teachers. The theory is that time equates to personal interest and knowledge on the part of the teacher, thereby giving that teacher a sense of what is motivating to students and enabling that teacher to develop more interesting curricula and to present them in more palatable ways.

In essence, however, this recommendation, like Recommendations 2 and 4, hinges on connecting students to schools by building personal relationships between students and members of school staff. As discussed above, the *Safe & Civil Schools* model strongly advocates for building positive relationships with students.

Another point in this recommendation focuses on the teacher's opportunity and ability to motivate students. The authors contend that with more time spent together, teachers will know what motivates their students and thus be better able to engage them in the learning process.

In the *Safe & Civil Schools* model, student motivation is a key factor in engaging students as well. However, the model treats the ability to motivate students as a skill that a teacher learns rather than a factor of time that students and teachers spend together.

In *CHAMPS: A Proactive & Positive Approach to Classroom Management*, for example, teachers learn that a person's level of motivation on any given task is a product of two factors: (a) how much the person wants the rewards that result from success at that task, and (b) to what degree the person expects to be successful at the task. Teachers learn about the interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in motivating a person. After coming to an understanding of the psychological aspects of motivation, they may select from a variety of motivating activities and suggestions, both for individual students and for the class as a whole.

Finally, the authors cite a research review by the National Research Council in which the "evidence suggests student engagement and learning are fostered by a school climate characterized by an ethic of caring and supportive relationships, respect, fairness, and trusts..." We would like to emphasize that helping school staffs create such an atmosphere is the primary goal of the *Safe & Civil Schools* model.

Recommendation 6

Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school.

This recommendation supports a twofold approach. First, teachers can improve instructional practices in professional learning communities. Instructional coaches, mentors, and master teachers can also be employed to help teachers improve their teaching skills. The second suggestion involves the reinstatement of job-related,



vocational education in high schools as an alternative to the college track.

How this recommendation aligns with the *Safe & Civil Schools* model

Of the six recommendations in this practice guide, this is the farthest removed from the *Safe & Civil Schools* model. After all, many view the *Safe & Civil Schools* model as concerned with behavior management, not academic instruction.

However, as mentioned previously, *Safe & Civil Schools* holds that there is an integral relationship between behavior and learning. The goal of *Safe & Civil Schools* is to help school staffs generate responsible and productive behavior in students—behavior that enables them to achieve emotionally and socially, as well as academically. In addition, a major goal of all *Safe & Civil Schools* materials is to reduce barriers to academic productivity by creating physically safe and socially civil settings so that no student’s academic progress is hampered by bullying, disruptions to instruction, and so on.

It is also our contention that, while academic achievement is necessary for graduation and will certainly serve students well in their adult roles, it is not the only achievement that matters, especially for students at risk of dropping out. For these students, appropriate social skills are equally important and should be considered as a piece of the “rigorous and relevant instruction” specified in this recommendation.

That said, *Safe & Civil Schools* does support the formation of professional learning communities where educators can improve their skills with the aid of their peers. Many of the *Safe & Civil Schools* materials include worksheets and questionnaires educators can use in collegial group study.

In addition, *Safe & Civil Schools* strongly advocates instructional coaching. In *Coaching Classroom Management: Strategies and Tools for Administrators and Coaches*, authors Randy Sprick, Jim Knight, Wendy Reinke, and Tricia McKale consider “coaching to be the keystone—the final stone placed at the peak of an arch that gives it

strength and stability. Without coaching, on-the-job learning by teachers is at best scattershot; the effect of professional development is muted, and the measure of successful implementation ill defined. The bottom line is that without coaching any professional development teachers receive is far less likely to become a reality in the classroom” (Sprick, Knight, Reinke, & McKale, 2006, p. 2).

Conclusion

The report concludes by defining its purpose (“to provide...recommendations for addressing dropping out based on evidence”) and by reiterating that the practices incorporated in these recommendations “have demonstrated impacts on outcomes related to dropping out” (p. 39).

The authors feel that students drop out for a variety of reasons and that families and communities need to play a larger part in encouraging students to seek and attain the education they need to achieve success as adults. However, they believe that these practices, when implemented collectively, will serve as “a sound starting point to help educators do what they can to reduce dropping out.”

We agree with the authors’ conclusions. And, given that *Safe & Civil Schools* materials, programs, and professional development services embody these six recommendations (and have done so for many years), we further contend that educators who implement our materials and services will better promote school connectedness and student retention. We assert that *Safe & Civil Schools* programs, when implemented with fidelity, can assist educators in their efforts to decrease drop out rates, increase graduation rates, and even more importantly, better prepare the nation’s youth for success in life. That the I.E.S. recommends these six elements already featured in our programs supports our contention.

