

Lisa Famularo, Ph.D.
Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy
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Hello, my name is Lisa Famularo. I oversee research and evaluation at the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. For those of you who do not know us, the Rennie Center seeks to foster thoughtful public discourse and informed policy making through non-partisan, independent research, civic engagement, and effective action. We are solely and exclusively a fact-finding and fact-reporting entity, and do not advocate but rather seek only to present information upon which to base sound and informed education policy decisions.

Over the last few years we have conducted a series of research projects examining issues related to students dropping out of school including raising the age of compulsory school attendance, school discipline and two studies to identify promising policies and practices in schools that have steadily made progress in reducing their dropout rates. Each of these projects has culminated in a policy brief that describes the study findings and based on those findings, provides considerations for policymakers. I've prepared a handout that summarizes key findings and considerations from each of these policy briefs along with the related bill provisions. The purpose of this document is to show the extent to which the bills you will hear today align with our research findings and considerations. I don't have time to talk through all of the findings so I'll touch on just a few from each of our reports.

Raising the compulsory attendance age

- Our review of recent research revealed little evidence to support the idea that an increase in compulsory age decreases dropout rates and increases graduation rates.
- For some, there may be reasons for legally requiring students to stay in school until age 18 that outweigh the lack of empirical evidence on this policy's impact. However, even the most prominent advocates of the policy acknowledge that raising the compulsory school age alone will not result in fewer dropouts and more graduates. They argue that this policy must be coupled with other actions to help at-risk students progress through high school.
- Research suggests it is important to:
 - Address student disengagement and alienation from school.
 - Improve attendance monitoring and early intervention systems.
 - Increase alternative education options because for some students, the traditional structure of high school just does not meet their needs.

School discipline

Our analysis of statewide discipline data suggests that:

- Disciplinary removal may exacerbate Massachusetts dropout problem.
- Out-of-school suspension may be over-used in Massachusetts.
- Massachusetts schools use out-of-school suspension for children as young as four years of age.

- There are disproportionately high rates of disciplinary removal among Massachusetts students of color and students from low-income families.
- General education students who have been removed from school for disciplinary reasons are not consistently provided with opportunities for alternative education.

We also learned that we could not get a complete picture of school discipline because school districts are only required to report to the state the nature of offenses that involve illegal substances, violence and criminal activity. As a result, all other incidents resulting in a suspension or expulsion appear as “unassigned” in the DESE database. Requiring districts to report the nature of all offenses that result in disciplinary removal will help to ensure that out-of-school suspension and expulsion are reserved for the most serious behaviors.

There are a number of unanswered questions about disciplinary removal that are important for Massachusetts to address. The most pressing are listed in our report *Act Out, Get Out* (page 19) – included among them is: *What is the relationship between disciplinary removal, dropping out and the achievement gap?* Massachusetts has a persistent achievement gap. The subgroups of students who are suspended and expelled at disproportionately higher rates than their peers are the same subgroups of students who drop out of Massachusetts schools at higher rates and lag behind in academic achievement. Research reviewed for our study on school discipline suggests that the use of disciplinary removal may contribute to the achievement gap while other studies have shown a relationship between suspension and dropping out. Taken together, these findings suggest the need for Massachusetts to take a closer look at the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic status disparities in school discipline as part of the strategy for reducing the state’s dropout rate and closing the achievement gap.

Promising practices for dropout reduction

Approaches identified by school and district leaders as critical to their success in reducing dropout rates include:

- Use of data to identify students at risk of dropping out.
- Personalize school by building stronger relationships between at-risk students and at least one adult in the school (e.g. advisory programs) and building stronger student to student relationships (e.g. peer-mentoring programs).
- Provide academic supports including extra help during and after school.
- Provide credit recovery programs for students who have fallen behind academically.
- Support students non-academic needs (e.g. social and emotional support).
- Support students transitioning from 8th to 9th grade.
- Programs to strengthen the connection between high school and college and careers – students need to understand the relevance of what they doing in high school to their goals for the future
- External partnerships to provide programs and services for at-risk students.
- Provide alternatives to traditional high school.

We also learned that districts lack clear guidelines and coherent systems to contact and re-enroll recent dropouts. In order to reach the goal set by the state’s dropout commission to reduce the dropout rate in

half by 2014, dropout recovery may be necessary. Policymakers may wish to consider creating clear guidelines or protocols for schools to follow for re-connecting with students who have dropped out, or engage community partners to assist with these efforts.

I hope you will take a few moments to review the other findings shown on the handout.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our work with you.