DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Best Practices in High-Performing Schools
Fiscal Year 2022

Report to the Legislature

As required by Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.35, subdivision 4

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Legislative Charge

This report is consistent with the requirements of Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.35, subdivision 4, which states, "Consistent with the requirements of this section, beginning June 20, 2012, the commissioner must annually report to the public and the legislature best practices implemented in those schools that are identified as high performing under federal expectations."

Introduction

Graduation rates are a key measurement of high schools' success in the eyes of the federal and state governments as well as many members of the general public. At a conceptual level, graduation reflects both academics—in that students must receive a certain number of credits in a range of subjects—and a school's ability to keep students engaged and connected to the educational experience. Academic struggles are one key reason students leave high school without a diploma, but so are a range of other factors connected to students' social, emotional, economic, and physical well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a range of stressors that increased the likelihood of a student dropping out, taking longer than four years to complete high school, or otherwise not graduating. Many schools across the state saw their graduation rates decline from 2019 (the last graduation cohort before the pandemic) and 2021. Some schools, however, saw their graduation rates increase.

This report focuses on high schools that met two criteria:

- a net increase in their four-year graduation rate of at least seven percentage points from 2019 to 2021
- a net increase of any size in their seven-year graduation rate (which is the most complete accounting available of whether students graduate, recognizing that some schools such as those focused on credit or dropout recovery specialize in serving students who are not likely to graduate in four years).

Schools that met these criteria are likely to have used practices that supported students both academically and in maintaining their connection to school during a time when both academics and connection to school were challenged by the pandemic.

All told, 32 schools in Minnesota met both of these criteria.

High Schools Showing Appreciable Increases in Graduation Rates between 2019 and 2021

District or Charter School Network	School
Academic Arts High School	Academic Arts High School
Anoka-Hennepin Public School District	Anoka-Hennepin Regional High School
Anoka-Hennepin Public School District	Anoka-Hennepin Technical High School
Anoka-Hennepin Public School District	Secondary Virtual School
Austin Public School District	Austin Area Learning Center
Blooming Prairie Public School District	Blooming Prairie Secondary
BlueSky Charter School	BlueSky Charter School

District or Charter School Network	School
Brainerd Public School District	ISD 181 Learning Center
Brooklyn Center School District	Insight School of Minnesota
Centennial Public School District	Centennial Area Learning Center
Chatfield Public Schools	Chatfield Secondary
Columbia Heights Public School District	Columbia Heights Senior High
Crosslake Community Charter School	Crosslake Community 6–12 Online School
Fergus Falls Public School District	iQ Academy
Greenbush-Middle River School District	Greenbush-Middle River Secondary
Hmong College Prep Academy	Hmong College Prep Academy HS
Lake of the Woods School District	Lake of the Woods Secondary
Lake Superior Public School District	Two Harbors Secondary
Mankato Public School District	Central High Area Learning Center
Martin County West School District	Martin County West Senior High
Metro Schools Charter	Metro College Prep
Minneapolis Public School District	Loring-Nicollet High
Minnesota Internship Center	Unity Campus
Moorhead Area Public School District	Moorhead Alternative Learning Center
Northland Learning Center	Northland Learning Center 010
Paladin Career and Technical High School	Paladin Career and Technical High School
Parkers Prairie Public School District	Parkers Prairie Secondary
Red Lake Falls Public School District	Lafayette Secondary
Richfield Public School District	Richfield College Experience Program
Richfield Public School District	Richfield Senior High
St. Paul Public School District	Open World Learning Secondary
Winona Area Public School District	Winona Area Learning Center

Analysis

Staff from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) contacted all 32 schools and interviewed leaders at 19 of them. These interviews revealed four major themes:

- Relationships
- Climate and mindset
- Responsiveness to indications of student need
- Targeting of academic interventions

These themes appeared in both traditional and credit recovery settings, and in both in-person and online schools. The way the themes manifested varied across these types, but they did occur across these types of schools.

A number of schools have been working with staff from Minnesota's Regional Centers of Excellence (RCEs) since the 2018-19 school year. Leaders in these schools named the work with RCE staff as important when analyzing their data and identifying specific changes to make in their practice.

Not every school identified each theme during its interview, and many schools that experienced declines in graduation rates may have acted in accordance with one or more of the themes. These themes are presented as a starting point for understanding potential best practices. Significant additional research over the coming years will undoubtedly greatly add to the understanding of what was most helpful to schools in increasing graduation rates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, some increases in graduation rates were partially attributable to changes in a school's population. For example, a school might have experienced general fluctuation in the percentage of students with individualized education plans calling for transition services after four years, or an online school typically serving students less likely to graduate in four years may have experienced a pandemic-specific influx of students more likely to graduate in four years.

Theme 1: Relationships

During the interviews, many leaders in smaller schools brought up their size specifically in the context of building and maintaining relationships with students and families. Many leaders in larger schools shared the number of staff they could dedicate to similar building and maintaining of relationships. Whether in a smaller setting where it is manageable for a principal to personally know all students and their families or a larger setting with established structures among teachers, counselors, school social workers, and other staff for relationship work, the importance of creating and sustaining individualized, interpersonal connections with students and families was perhaps the most broadly shared theme across the interviewed school leaders.

Many leaders described these relationships as a critical element for action in the other theme areas. For example, when a school's staff knew which adult in the building had the closest relationship with a student who was beginning to show an increase in absences or a decline in grades, they could respond by asking that adult to reach out to the student to learn more. What that adult learned could then inform the additional interventions taken by the broader school staff.

Regardless of setting size, building relationships requires intentionality on the part of school staff. Several school leaders described specific structures they used to promote relationship-building. One specific model used by multiple schools was to create small advisory groups of students who would work with the same advisor for the length of their time in high school. Advisors could then be given expectations for how often to contact families, how often to meet one-on-one with students, and how to keep those conversations focused on both what was going well for the student and where the student might be facing challenges. Other schools found other ways to ensure staff dedicated time to reaching out to students and families to build and strengthen connections.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, having existing strong relationships with students was helpful to many schools in keeping students engaged. Whether through frequent communication digitally and over the phone or by prioritizing in-person time when it was safe to do so, several school leaders described the steps they took to keep their staff connected to students and families.

Theme 2: Climate and Mindset

Many school leaders, especially those in credit recovery settings, emphasized the importance of school climate and student mindset. These two concepts are closely related, as the climate in a school can significantly impact the way a student thinks and feels about that school.

In credit recovery settings in particular, students can often come to the school with a negative attitude about school in general and their individual place in school in particular. Multiple leaders of schools focused on credit recovery described their staff's efforts to create a school climate focused on celebrating desired student behaviors and promoting students' ideas of themselves as learners with the potential to do well, graduate, and go on to a successful life after graduation.

In more traditional settings, school climate and student mindset still matter, especially when confronting challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. The more welcoming the school is and the more positively students think of themselves in relation to school, the more likely they are to stay engaged.

When describing how to create the desired climate and corresponding mindset, school leaders emphasized the importance of consistency from their staff and of taking a connecting, supportive approach rather than a punitive one. Consistency from staff in this case means having the adults in the school be consistent with each other and consistent over time; achieving this can require an intentional effort by school leaders.

When describing the approach their staff take, school leaders emphasized connecting with and supporting students rather than punishing them. To take a specific example, increases in a student's absences were often treated as a warning sign of some additional support needed rather than something to be addressed punitively. Even when engaging outside agencies such as county government to address absenteeism, school leaders' emphasis tended to be on learning more about a student's situation, sharing information with that student and, when appropriate, finding ways to provide support to that student in overcoming barriers to attendance.

Theme 3: Responsiveness to Indications of Student Need

Several school leaders described the ways their staff identified and responded to warning signs of student need. Some leaders explicitly referenced the concept of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), while others described actions that fit the basic principles of that approach even if they didn't use the specific language of MTSS. Most underlying student needs could be grouped into three major categories: academic, connection to school, and mental health. Regardless of the underlying need, the same general approach to responsiveness applied. The first step was to regularly scan for indications of need, the second was to identify the appropriate response, and the third was to identify who would provide that response. When made a regular practice, this sort of responsive system proved very helpful for keeping students in school and on a path to graduation.

In the first step of regularly scanning for indications of need, different types of information would be helpful when searching for students in each major category of need. Academic needs typically showed up in assessed performance, whether measured by grades or other measures of mastering academic standards. Absences are often an indication of students losing their sense of connection to school. Mental health needs could sometimes also manifest in absences, but in many other cases could show up in in-school behavior. The most common way

to scan for this information was to regularly convene teachers and other school staff to review data (both quantitative and qualitative) about each student and note which students were showing indications of need. These could be done in cohorts, with the same set of staff regularly reviewing data for the same set of students.

The second step was to identify the appropriate response. This typically involved picking from a group of interventions regularly used for students with similar needs, such as arranging for individualized academic attention or reaching out to a student or their family to learn more about their situation.

The third step was to identify who would provide that response. Sometimes this could be a staff member whose role meant they were well-positioned to reach out to respond to a particular need, such as a school social worker. Other times this could be the staff member with the best existing relationship with the student in question, as that staff member would be most likely to get a response from the student.

A key feature of many schools was that this process received dedicated time and used consistent protocols. By embedding this work in adult practice, schools were able to increase both the speed and quality of their responsiveness compared to past practices that relied more on ad hoc reactions to perceived student need.

Theme 4: Targeting of Academic Interventions

Several school leaders described specific ways they would target academic interventions for students who were not academically on track to graduate, whether in four years or on a longer timeframe. Some leaders in traditional schools, for example, discussed interventions such as informing students' families of areas of academic struggle, arranging for tutoring, and providing their own in-house credit recovery programming. Multiple credit recovery school leaders described the level of detail they used when determining which particular standards a specific student would need to meet in order to receive credit.

This last point deserves some elaboration. In many schools focused on credit recovery, students come in having already taken a given course at least once without having received credit. For example, one student might come to the school needing their Algebra II credit, having already taken Algebra II once or twice at a traditional high school. Another student might also need an Algebra II credit after having taken parts of the course multiple times while moving between different high schools without ever mastering enough of the material to receive credit. Both students will enter the credit recovery school having already mastered some of the benchmarks in the relevant statewide mathematics standards, but they won't have mastered the exact same benchmarks. Putting both students in an identical Algebra II class, where each will repeat some amount of material they have already learned, could easily lead to one or both students concluding the class is not worth their time.

A more targeted approach involves assessing each student's mastery of specific standards as they enter the school and then providing them with access to more specific modules (which can be digitally or through in-person instruction) that teach them the standards they have yet to master. This provides a better use of students' time, increasing both their likelihood of staying in school and the rate at which they can earn credits. Taking this approach does not require sacrificing quality—one credit recovery school leader, for example, made a point of sharing that the school uses the exact same exit assessments for their courses as the traditional high

school in the same district, ensuring that students have achieved the same level of mastery as students in the traditional high school.

The specifics of academic targeting varied from school to school based on the population they intend to serve, but the core concept of targeting academic interventions in addition to providing the social-emotional supports and responsiveness of the earlier themes was common to many schools.

Conclusion

Much more remains to be learned about best practices across many dimensions of performance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the data available at the time of writing and research from before the pandemic, some of the themes identified in this report may continue to be found in schools that most successfully navigated the pandemic. While the change in the graduation rate is far from the only aspect of a high school's performance that matters, it remains a useful piece of information when analyzing schools both in terms of their academic program and their ability to meet the full range of student needs.

The four themes of relationships, climate and mindset, responsiveness to indications of student need, and targeting of academic interventions can all be points for future analysis of how schools approached the pandemic as well as preparations for other potential disruptions to students' educational experiences (even those not on the scale of a global pandemic).