

Addressing School Dropout in Texas

A Summary for Teachers and Practitioners
of
Dropout Prevention: A Practice Guide
(U.S. Department of Education,
Institute of Education Sciences, 2008)

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Each year more than half a million young people drop out of high school, and the rate at which they drop out has remained about the same for the last 30 years, even as spending on education has increased significantly.

Because dropping out has multiple adverse consequences for individuals and society as a whole, helping young people complete high school is a worthwhile objective. This guide is intended to assist educators in planning and executing dropout strategies to accomplish that worthwhile objective. Recommendations included in this guide are from *Dropout Prevention: A Practice Guide*, a publication of the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

Who should read this guide?

The audience for this guide is superintendents, district administrators, principals, and middle and high school personnel seeking solutions to the problem of students dropping out. The guide aims to identify effective and actionable practices that increase students' motivation to stay in school and complete high school with a regular diploma. These practices address students' academic, behavioral and personal needs and have demonstrated impacts on outcomes related to dropping out.

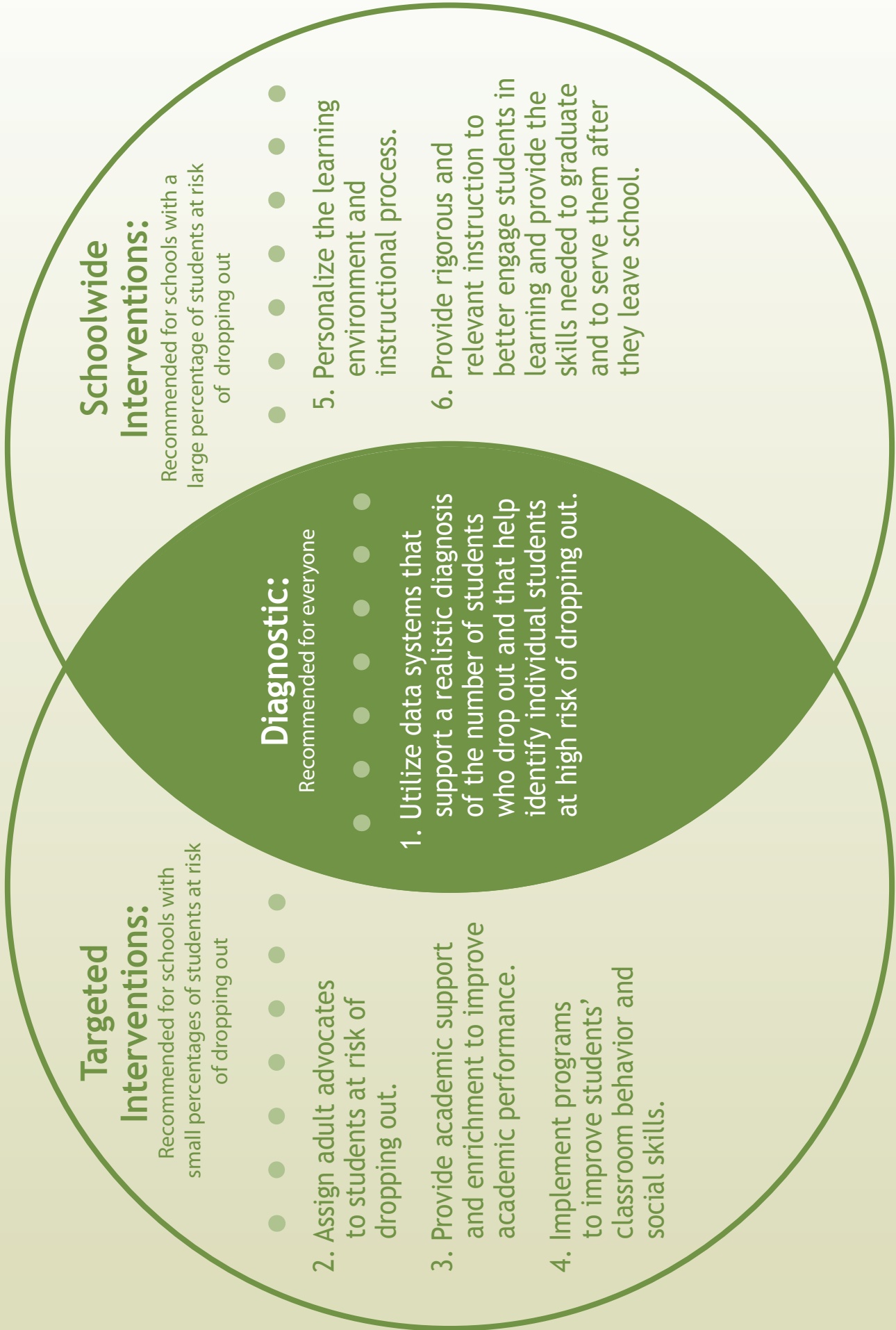
How was this set of recommendations determined?

The six recommendations in this guide are based on the expertise of the Dropout Prevention Panel, who examined research studies that have evaluated the impact of dropout prevention programs. This panel distilled the evidence from specific programs into general strategies that schools and districts can implement to reduce rates of school dropout. The sensible practices recommended in this guide provide a sound starting point to help educators do what they can to prevent school dropout.

How many recommendations should schools consider implementing?

Recommendation one—utilizing data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and help identify the individuals at risk—is the essential first step to launch reform efforts. Recommendations two, three, and four describe targeted interventions for the subset of students identified by that data system. Recommendations five and six suggest comprehensive, schoolwide reform strategies aimed at increasing student engagement and decreasing students' risk of dropping out. These recommendations suggest strategies that might be adopted in schools where a large proportion of the student body is at risk for dropping out. Overall, a strategic approach that integrates multiple recommendations has the potential to make the most impact.

Recommendations



◇ Recommendation 1 (Diagnostic)

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

The critical first step for preventing dropping out is to analyze student data to understand who is at risk of dropping out. Schools need a way to determine the scope of the problem and to identify the students who are most at risk in order to match dropout interventions to student need.

The development of comprehensive, longitudinal, student-level databases that include unique student IDs has permitted researchers to identify factors associated with dropping out. Such databases now permit school personnel to better identify the individual students at risk of dropping out, and to identify them earlier.³ Researchers agree that student absences, grade retention, and low academic achievement are indicators for dropping out,⁴ and research shows that critical transition points such as the move from middle school to high school are difficult for already struggling students.⁵ Low socio-economic status and behavioral problems are also known risk factors for dropping out.⁶

How to carry out this recommendation

Schools should designate a staff member or team to review and regularly monitor data on incoming students, existing students, and students who recently left school. Effective measures and practices for school-based teams include:

- Using comprehensive, **longitudinal, student-level databases** with unique IDs that, at a minimum, include data on student absences, grade retention, and low academic achievement.
- Establishing automated early warning systems that flag students with substantial attendance problems, course failures, grade retention, and behavioral problems.
- Reviewing the attendance records, grade retention, disciplinary records, and academic assessments of incoming students to identify those at-risk, particularly before the transition to high school.
- Continually monitoring the academic and social performance of all students to identify students who recently experienced a life event, academic challenges, or other social or behavioral problems that may indicate a higher risk of dropping out.
- Surveying or meeting with students periodically to learn about their sense of belonging and engagement.
- Collecting and documenting accurate information on student withdrawals and transfers. Avoid using vague administrative codes such as “left school” and verify transfers to another school.

◇ Recommendation 2 (Targeted intervention)

Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.

Personal and academic needs can be addressed through a meaningful and sustained personal relationship with a trained adult advocate. Adult advocates assist students academically and socially by guiding them to make intelligent choices and by modeling positive behavior. Research suggests that students who have ongoing relationships with adults feel a greater sense of school membership, attachment, and involvement.⁷

Additional benefits of adult-student relationships include reduced risky behaviors, reduced absentee rates, improved grades, and improved communication and social skills.⁸

How to carry out this recommendation

Assign an adult advocate to work as a case manager with individuals who are at a high risk of dropping out. Administrators need to be the most enthusiastic supporters of adult advocates through flexible policies that encourage all to work together for the benefit of the student. Consider the following guidelines for the selection of advocates and their roles and responsibilities:

- Teachers and school counselors are unlikely to have the time to establish a trusting advocacy relationship. The adult advocate could be a resource teacher, community member, or social worker.
- Advocates should have caseloads no larger than 15 students. Purposefully matching students and adults increases the likelihood that the relationship will thrive.
- Establish a regular time for students to meet with the adult or require that meetings occur during breaks within the school day, such as lunch or advisory periods. Weekly meetings may be sufficient for some students, whereas students with more severe problems may need daily meetings.
- Train adult advocates on how to help students overcome various obstacles, ranging from transportation to school to poor relationships with teachers.
- Schools should not force disinterested staff to be advocates and may consider partnering with local social service agencies or faith-based organizations to provide adult advocates.

◇ Recommendation 3 (Targeted intervention)

Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.

Academic interventions can help address skill gaps, offset a cycle of frustration, and enrich the academic experience for students who may be bored or disengaged.⁹ Students can receive academic support through more intensive school programs, or through homework assistance or tutoring programs. Academic support can be provided for individuals or small groups during or after school.

How to carry out this recommendation

- Provide targeted interventions in subject areas such as reading, writing, or math.
- Provide individual or small group support in test-taking skills or study skills. This academic support can be conducted by adults or by peers during advisory or study skill periods.
- Offer enrichment courses as electives, or offer additional support during advisory periods at the beginning or end of the day. If enrichment activities are offered at the same time as core classes, students may miss key curriculum.
- Provide extra study time and opportunities for credit recovery and accumulation through after school, Saturday school, or summer enrichment programs. Schools can also provide students at risk of dropping out with summer school enrichment programs that increase engagement and target key academic areas.
- Recruit tutors from local community organizations, businesses, postsecondary institutions, or parent groups.

◇ Recommendation 4 (Targeted intervention)

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

School engagement includes a component of behavior and a component of identification with school.¹⁰ Disruptive behavior is correlated with dropping out.¹¹ When schools help at-risk students self-regulate their emotions and interactions with others, disruptive behavior can be reduced. Students who learn to behave positively during school have increased school affiliation and engagement. Developing positive problem-solving and life skills also helps students learn how to avoid potentially harmful behaviors outside of school.

How to carry out this recommendation

- Help students establish attainable academic and behavioral goals with specific benchmarks, such as “turn in daily homework” or “attend all classes in one week.”
- Recognize student accomplishments through positive rewards for progress toward goals.
- Teach strategies to strengthen problem-solving and decision-making skills for targeted students within the existing curricula, or within a life skills course, or in a small group seminar.
- Establish partnerships with community-based program providers such as social services, welfare, mental health, and law enforcement agencies to help alleviate problems that present themselves during school hours.¹²
- Provide staff with professional development on how to improve at-risk students' classroom behavior and social skills. Lessons designed to improve classroom behavior can be incorporated into existing courses with the goal of making positive communications the standard practice of the school.

◇ Recommendation 5 (Schoolwide intervention)

Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.

Students attending large schools can become alienated and uninterested to the point where they feel little attachment to school and drop out.¹³ Small learning communities foster personalization and have shown promise at addressing outcomes related to preventing dropping out. Reforms aimed at creating a personalized learning environment where students are engaged and have a sense of belonging can reduce dropout rates.

The National Research Council concluded that the “evidence suggests that student engagement and learning are fostered by a school climate characterized by an ethic of caring and supportive relationships, respect, fairness, and trusts; and teachers’ sense of shared responsibility and efficacy related to student learning.”¹⁴ When a caring and supportive environment was combined with “academic press,” or a focus on learning and high expectations for student achievement, student outcomes were most improved .¹⁵

Some of the other benefits of a personalized learning environment are that it provides opportunities for innovative teaching, more engaging curriculum, and interdisciplinary teaching teams.

How to carry out this recommendation

Since some restructuring may be necessary in creating a personalized learning environment, administrators must establish support for reforms by soliciting staff input, providing professional development, and developing realistic timelines for implementation. Strategies designed to create a more personalized learning environment range from establishing small learning communities to providing extracurricular activities. Recommended whole-school reform alternatives include:

- **9th Grade Academies:** Schools might establish an academy to ease the transition to high school by housing 9th grade students in a separate wing or floor of the school building, with core academic teacher teams sharing the same students.¹⁶
- **School within a school:** Establish a thematically based small learning community. Students self-select which school they want to remain in for the duration of high school.¹⁷ Each small learning community consists of an interdisciplinary team of teachers whom students work with throughout high school.
- **Small school:** District administrators can establish a third type of small learning community by authorizing the creation of a school with lower student enrollment.

Schools that do not wish to undertake whole-school reform efforts can implement the following less ambitious strategies for personalizing the school environment.

- Establish **team teaching**. Benefits of team teaching include a coordinated approach to instruction that enables teachers to support each other in both instructional

planning and meeting the needs of their students.

- Create **smaller classes**. Lowering the number of students in a classroom allows teachers to interact with students on an individual level more frequently and allows students to feel a greater sense of belonging.
- Create **extended time** in the classroom. Implementing innovative schedule features—such as block scheduling, extended class periods, or advisory and study periods—provides more time for student-teacher and student-student interactions during the day.¹⁸
- Provide **extracurricular activities** such as sports, clubs, after school field trips, guest speakers, postsecondary partnerships, or service groups. Survey students about their interests and personally invite students' to participate in extracurricular activities.

◇ Recommendation 6 (Schoolwide intervention)

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.

As more states adopt high school exit exams, students must increasingly master academic content in order to graduate from high school. To improve the rigor of their classrooms, teachers need ongoing professional development to expand their knowledge and enhance their skills. Developing professional learning communities where teachers collaborate on instructional design and provide collective feedback on their teaching, perhaps with the assistance of instructional coaches or mentors, may be a way to improve instructional practices.¹⁹

Instructional content must be relevant as well. Among the reforms aimed at providing relevant instruction is career and technical education (CTE) which allows “multiple pathways” toward careers and higher education. Multiple pathways models consist of three components: college preparatory academic core classes, a choice of professional or technical core classes that offer academic and real world applications, and field-based learning.²⁰ In this model, the curriculum must be engaging and relevant whether students are going to college or to the workplace.

Some high school reform efforts have included both meaningful academic curriculum and a variety of job-related practical applications.²¹ For example, **career academies** permit students to choose majors and seek to ensure that students gain relevant career and technical skills in high school without sacrificing the academic preparation that is necessary for college.

Finally, evidence suggests that efforts to provide students with access to advisors who can provide individual assistance on postsecondary options may help keep students in school.

How to carry out this recommendation

- Provide teachers with professional development workshops on effective instructional practices, how to smoothly integrate academic content with career-related information, and allocate time for professional **learning communities**.
- Integrate relevant career models into traditional course content. On a larger scale, integrate academic content with career and skills-based themes through career academies or multiple pathways models. Large comprehensive high schools can create “schools within a school” around multiple career options such as health, business, or the arts. Charter and magnet schools that focus on a single career theme provide another option that allows students to specialize.
- Host career days and facilitate visits to postsecondary campuses. Invite community members who work in different fields to share their experiences in the workplace.
- Provide students, particularly first generation college students, with assistance on college admissions processes. Curriculum reform that makes explicit the connection between academic skills and professional success should help to inspire greater interest in college, as should opportunities to have students visit colleges and interact with students and staff from colleges.
- Partner with local businesses to provide opportunities for work-related experience such as internships, simulated job interviews, or long-term employment.

Conclusion

The practices in this guide are not the equivalent of a dropout prevention recipe for all schools to follow, but they do include the essential ingredients for improving graduation rates. Implementing a single recommendation is not recommended; schools need to adopt multiple, mutually supportive practices to increase graduation rates and prevent school dropout. The initiation of targeted and schoolwide strategies should also include a plan to ensure high-quality implementation over the long term.

For a more detailed explanation of the six recommendations and the corresponding levels of evidence to support each, see the full report of the Dropout Prevention Panel.

Dynarski, M., Clarke, L., Cobb, B., Finn, J., Rumberger, R., and Smink, J. (2008). *Dropout Prevention: A Practice Guide* (NCEE 2008–4025). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>.

This report is available on the IES Web site at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>.

Endnotes

¹ Heckman & LaFontaine (2007); Warren & Halpern-Manners (2007).

² Kronick & Hargis (1998); Morton (1998); Skromme, Van Allen, & Bensen (1998).

³ Farmer & Payne (1992); Kronick & Hargis (1998); Roderick (1993); Suh, Suh, & Houston (in press); Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay (1997); Wehlage (1989).

⁴ Battin-Pearson et al. (2000); Barrington & Hendricks (1989); Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs (1997); Ensminger & Slusarick (1992); Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple (2002); Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey (1997); Finn & Rock (1997); Morris, Ehren, & Lenz (1991); Rumberger (1995); Allensworth & Easton (2005).

⁵ Allensworth & Easton (2007); Roderick & Camburn (1999).

⁶ Goldschmidt & Wang (1999); Rumberger & Larson (1998); Ekstrom et al. (1986); Phelan (1992); Rumberger (1987); Suh, Suh, & Houston (in press).

⁷ Wehlage (1989); Wehlage et al. (1989).

⁸ Pringle et al. (1993); Cragar (1994); Sipe (1996); McPartland & Nettles (1991); Grossman & Garry (1997).

⁹ Balfanz, McPartland, & Shaw (2002).

¹⁰ See Voelkl (1997); Finn (1989); National Research Council (2004).

¹¹ Rumberger (1995); Rumberger & Palardy (2005); Rumberger & Larson (1998); Swanson & Schneider (1999); Goldschmidt & Wang (1999).

¹² Larson & Rumberger (1998); Snipes et al. (2006); Shirm et al. (2006); Harrell et al. (1998).

¹³ Wehlage et al. (1989); National Research Council (2004).

¹⁴ National Research Council (2004), p. 103.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kemple & Snipes (2000); Kemple (2004)

¹⁷ Quint et al. (2006).

¹⁸ Kemple & Snipes (2000); Kemple (2004); Kemple et al. (2005).

¹⁹ See Little (2003); Louis & Marks (1998); McLaughlin & Talbert (2001).

²⁰ Kemple & Snipes (2000); Kemple (2004); Kemple et al. (2005).

²¹ Sterns & Stearns (2007); Grubb (2007); Plank (2001); Stiles & Brady (2007).

Note: For a complete list of references, please see the actual practice guide: *Dropout Prevention: A Practice Guide*, available on the Institute of Education Sciences web site at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>.

Checklist for carrying out the 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 high risk of dropping out

- Use longitudinal, student-level data to get an accurate read of graduation and drop-out rates.
- Use data to identify incoming students with histories of academic problems, truancy, behavioral problems, and retentions.
- Monitor the academic and social performance of all students continually.
- Review student-level data to identify students at risk of dropping out before key academic transitions.
- Monitor students' sense of engagement and belonging in school.
- Collect and document accurate information on student withdrawals.

Recommendation 2. Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out

- Choose adults who are committed to investing in the student's personal and academic success, keep caseloads low, and purposefully match students with adult advocates.
- Establish a regular time in the school day or week for students to meet with the adult.
- Communicate with adult advocates about the various obstacles students may encounter—and provide adult advocates with guidance and training about how to work with students, parents, or school staff to address the problems.

Recommendation 3. Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance

- Provide individual or small group support in test-taking skills, study skills, or targeted subject areas such as reading, writing, or math.
- Provide extra study time and opportunities for credit recovery and accumulation through after school, Saturday school, or summer enrichment programs.

Recommendation 4. Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills

- Use adult advocates or other engaged adults to help students establish attainable academic and behavioral goals with specific benchmarks.
- Recognize student accomplishments.
- Teach strategies to strengthen problem-solving and decision-making skills.
- Establish partnerships with community-based program providers and other agencies such as social services, welfare, mental health, and law enforcement.

Recommendation 5. Personalize the learning environment and instructional process

- Establish small learning communities.
- Establish team teaching.
- Create smaller classes.
- Create extended time in classroom through changes to the school schedule.
- Encourage student participation in extracurricular activities.

(10)

CHECKLIST FOR CARRYING OUT THE RECOMMENDATIONS

**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**

- Provide teachers with ongoing ways to expand their knowledge and improve their skills.
- Integrate academic content with career and skill-based themes through career academies or multiple pathways models.
- Host career days and offer opportunities for work-related experiences and visits to postsecondary campuses.
- Provide students with extra assistance and information about the demands of college.
- Partner with local businesses to provide opportunities for work-related experience such as internships, simulated job interviews, or long-term employment.