



2015

NEW FROM THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH • AUGUST

Graduation 20/20 Pilot Focus Group Results

Launched during the 2014-2015 school year, the Graduation 20/20 pilot project included 7 high schools located in 6 counties served by Regional Education Service Agency 2 (RESA 2). The high schools volunteered to participate in a program to improve graduation rates with an emphasis on students with disabilities. School-based teams attended a multiday training facilitated by the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) in November 2014. At the training, facilitators introduced modules describing evidence-based practices and programs. They also introduced an Excel spreadsheet, the Core Data Tool, and an action plan template to assist school teams in identifying areas of need and planning interventions. The Core Data Tool produces tables and graphs based on rates for graduation, dropout, attendance, mathematics and English language arts proficiency, and discipline data that are entered by the school teams. Based on these data, school teams were expected to develop and begin the implementation of action plans to positively impact graduation rates.

After the initial training from the NDPC-SD, RESA 2 took the lead in providing support to the teams; technical assistance and other supports also came from the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE).

Method of study. At a face-to-face Graduation 20/20 conference in August 2015, the pilot cohort began its second year of the program. While in attendance, members of the school teams had the opportunity to participate in a focus group interview. The aim of the interview was to collect data to inform improvements to the Graduation 20/20 program. The structured conversation was led by an evaluator who asked the participants about their experiences with Graduation 20/20 during the pilot year. The discussion was recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed for important points and themes.

Findings. Focus group participants discussed benefits as well as challenges encountered during the first year of Graduation 20/20. Notably, they offered a number of potential solutions for overcoming many of the challenges (see “Looking ahead” section below). Participants mentioned several beneficial aspects of participation in the pilot program:

- Teams used the NDPC-SD modules as starting points to brainstorm strategies they thought would work in their schools.
- Schools leveraged existing teams to create Graduation 20/20 teams, because meeting days were already set and no additional burden was put on personnel.
- Teams formulated action plans and in some cases began to implement their plans.
- Teams received significant support from the RESA personnel; RESA support kept the teams on target and motivated.
- Teams used resources from the NDPC-SD and WVDE as a source of ideas they could adapt to their own schools’ environment, while applying evidence-based strategies.

“We need to know why our students are dropping out . . . We need to know why they are leaving and once we know why they are leaving, we can do something about it.”

“I realize they [the students] are all in the same state, coming from the same culture, but that doesn’t mean they all have the same needs.”

“If you can’t read, that sets you up to be a potential dropout because your frustration level is only going to grow.”

Challenges encountered by school teams during the pilot varied and included the following:

- NDPC-SD modules were overwhelming at first; later in the year, teams did not have time to go through each module page by page.
- Expectations for the pilot program were not immediately clear.
- Teams could not access data required to complete the Core Data Tool.
- No incentives or financial support were offered.
- Momentum suffered at some schools due to attrition of original school team members.
- Teams would have benefited from sample action plans and other documents to support program implementation.
- Communications from the WVDE did not always reach school team members.
- Students lacked a voice in the program, which could lead to a lack of student buy-in and engagement.

Other barriers identified by the focus group extended beyond the scope of the Graduation 20/20 program. Several focus group participants voiced the need for functional literacy, including not only an increase in students' abilities to read, but to also show proficiency in comprehension, summarizing, predicting, and inferring. Additionally, some group members described a culture of mistrust and resistance to change in West Virginia. They worried the reluctance to roll-out, accept, and institutionalize change keeps schools in our state several steps behind the rest of the nation.

Looking ahead. The focus group participants described some of the things that helped them deal with the challenges that emerged during the year:

- Gaining access to ZoomWV, ZoomWV-e, and the West Virginia Early Warning System (developed by Bright Bytes) allowed teams to complete the Core Data Tool.
- Receiving support from the WVDE and Dr. Martirano's One Voice One Focus vision plan which makes graduation one of the state priorities, helped keep schools motivated to participate in Graduation 20/20.

Participants provided suggestions to further address challenges, including the following:

- Although they greatly appreciated the interventions section of the West Virginia Early Warning System, they thought more special education data is needed in this system as well as in ZoomWV.
- Participants saw the \$2,500 to be granted to each Graduation 20/20 school during 2015-2016 as highly beneficial, yet they remained concerned that this may not be enough financial support.

Other comments took the form of recommendations:

- Establish inclusive student leadership teams to help engage students, gain their buy-in, and keep their voices front and center.
- Assess for functional literacy—that is, literacy that goes beyond phonics—before Grade 3.
- Provide students with audio tools, such as audio textbooks and reading pens.
- Improve communications by creating a listserv for school teams and RESA staff.
- Provide school teams with resources such as sample action plans, checklists of program requirements, resource guides, lists of intervention ideas, monthly schedules of required activities, and instructions on how to access different data elements.
- Hold additional face to face trainings/meetings.

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