THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON AT-RISK STUDENTS, SCHOOLS, AND GRADUATION RATES

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INTRODUCTION

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The impact of pandemic school closure on students, educators, schools, districts, and communities is likely to be the greatest education challenge of our lifetime. Prior crises like wars, plagues, and natural disasters that interrupted schooling for prolonged periods have done significant harm to whole cohorts of children in terms of social and emotional development, academic achievement, and long-term quality of life (Smith-Spark, 2021). The negative impacts of the recent pandemic school closure are likely to be more severe and longer lasting than we initially thought. Michelle Kaffenberger, a research fellow on the RISE Programme at the University of Oxford, predicts that a three-month school closure can reduce long-term learning by a full year (Smith-Spark, 2021). What is the impact of a 15-month closure going to be?

Early indicators of this crisis are being reported by school systems across the nation. These include doubling and tripling of grade failure rates, unaccounted-for students, and spikes in mental health issues and student suicides. Already-at-risk students are now more at risk and many previously on-track students are now credit deficient, socially dysfunctional, and developmentally deficient. Many educators have had their professional and personal lives upended and face new challenges with school reopening.

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The National Dropout Prevention Center has monitored pandemic school closures since they began and from its research and experience offers guidance to support schools and educators as they address this new challenge.

- Educators must understand and anticipate the short-term and long-term impact of pandemic school closures on students, staffs, school systems, and communities.
- Educators must analyze their own situations to assess the impact of pandemic school closures within their local context.
- Educators must strategically develop and implement system-wide localized response plans to minimize the negative impact on students, staffs, and school systems.

Every district in America needs to develop a comprehensive action plan to address this increasingly difficult challenge. This monograph provides excellent guidance on both the short- and long-term actions that districts should consider as they put together their action plans. It is a valuable resource at a critical time for schools and, most important, for our most needy students.
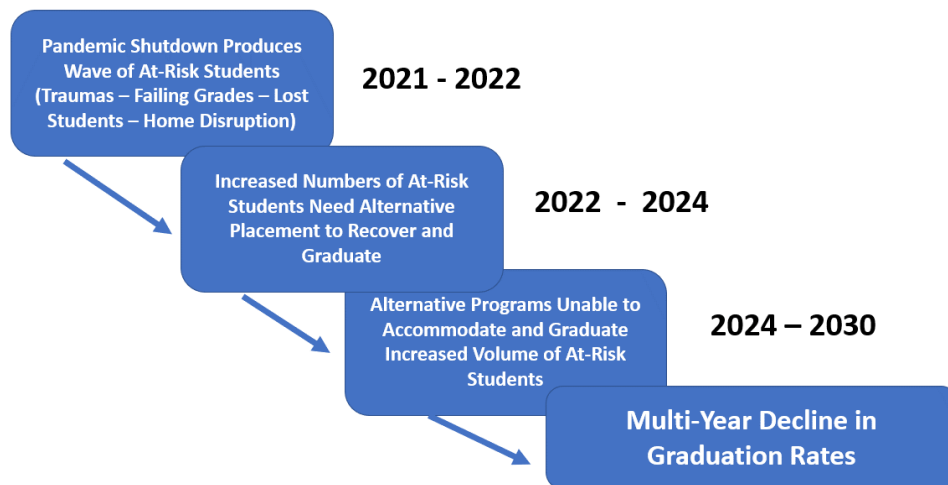
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Statement of Problem

In 2021 and for many years to come, America's school districts will face a drastically different postpandemic landscape with lower graduation rates if we do not immediately prepare to effectively serve a different and larger at-risk population. Illness and death, stop-and-go school closures, outside-of-school hardships, and less-than-effective virtual instruction have negatively impacted a generation of students. More and more students are now trauma impacted and districts are reporting doubling and tripling of grade failure rates during virtual instruction which predict comparable increases in grade retentions (Gilreath, 2020). Schools report "lost" students who have disappeared during virtual instruction and who are likely to be current or future dropouts if and when they are "found" (Anderson, 2020).

As schools return to what at best may be a "new normal", they will face doubled and tripled numbers of at-risk students across all grade levels. These students will present a new set of academic, behavioral, and trauma-impacted educational challenges. To prevent drastic and multiyear declines of graduation rates, districts must find ways to recover, remediate, accommodate, and somehow help these students to graduate. Districts have historically relied on, and will likely continue to rely on, alternative schools and programs to serve many of these students. Unfortunately, many alternative schools and programs are currently ineffective; do not transform retained, traumatized, and behaviorally challenged students into graduates; and are not structurally able to accommodate increased numbers of referrals and enrollment spikes.

Could This Happen To Your School District?

Pandemic Shutdown Produces Wave of At-Risk Students (Traumas – Failing Grades – Lost Students – Home Disruption)	**2021 - 2022**
Increased Numbers of At-Risk Students Need Alternative Placement to Recover and Graduate	**2022 - 2024**
Alternative Programs Unable to Accommodate and Graduate Increased Volume of At-Risk Students	**2024 – 2030**
Multi-Year Decline in Graduation Rates	

To avoid drastic multiyear declines in graduation rates, districts must quickly assess the effectiveness and capacity of at-risk student services, particularly their alternative schools and programs, and make necessary changes to serve the increased complexity and growing size of at-risk populations.

The Impact of the Pandemic on Already-At-Risk Students

Our students already at risk will become more and differently at risk as a result of the pandemic. Classic risk factors such as family dysfunction and poverty (Hammond et al., 2007) that already hinder the success of many students are almost certainly magnified by the pandemic. Low income and marginally employed parents have suffered the most during the pandemic and their poverty levels have become more pronounced. Stress levels within already dysfunctional families have increased as a result of isolation, illness, and death. Subsequently, students living in those households have been adversely affected. Many of the wraparound services that helped at-risk students survive behaviorally and academically before the pandemic have not been available to them for six, nine, or 12 months. School districts like Clark County in Nevada are moving to resume face-to-face instruction due to the more than doubling of student suicide rates during the pandemic shutdown (Passoth, 2021). Educator strategies historically used to motivate and engage our marginal students, such as hands-on learning, interpersonal connections, individualized instruction, mentoring, service learning, and extracurricular participation, have been difficult or impossible to deliver during school shutdown. Districts that were able to maintain face-to-face instruction have severely curtailed sports and extracurricular offerings that motivated many at-risk students and kept them in school. Whether a school had five or 500 at-risk students before the pandemic, those same students now have more risk factors, more severe risk factors, and access to fewer supports. Without solutions, we can anticipate that our past success rates with already-at-risk students will decline.

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We must also consider that resumption of face-to-face instruction after shutdown can make or break the trajectory of some fragile already-at-risk students. As schools reopen, educators will assess the academic progress of returning students and, when academic achievement gaps are found, must somehow communicate that status and catch-up options to students and parents. Anderson School District Five in South Carolina provided 5-day face-to-face school for the full 2020-21 school year but offered a semester-long virtual option to concerned students and parents. Tom Wilson, Superintendent of that district, said recently, "We have already-at-risk high school students who returned to school after virtual instruction, faced increased

academic deficits, and were offered immediate remediation options, but the students decided to drop out in the face of what seemed like insurmountable obstacles."

The Impact of the Pandemic on Not-Previously-At-Risk Students

Many students who had few or no risk factors and who were behaviorally and academically successful are now at risk. Many families that seemed "normal" before the pandemic have become dysfunctional from new stressors and have transmitted that stress to their children. A recent article in *The Washington Post* stated, "Holed up at home, students dwell in the glare of computer screens, missing friends and teachers. Some are failing classes. Some are depressed. Some are part of families reeling with lost jobs, gaps in childcare or bills that can't be paid" (St. George & Strauss, 2021). Prepandemic studies reported that at least half of our students were adversely impacted by childhood traumas (Gailer et al., 2018). We can now assume that percentage to be significantly higher.

> Some pandemic-impacted students will be only academically deficient and require remediation, but we can expect sharp increases in the behavioral issues and disengagement challenges that accompany retentions and overage-for-grade status.

Districts across the nation are reporting that prolonged periods of virtual instruction have resulted in academic loss, lower grades, and increased course failure rates. To the extent that we apply prepandemic expectations, grading practices, and promotion/retention policies as schools reopen, we can expect larger percentages of overage-for-grade students.

Consider the impact on a 500-student school if, during six to nine months of virtual or blended instruction, 10% of the students who would have otherwise attended and learned were either "lost", did not "log on" enough to be counted as present, did not complete enough assignments, earned failing grades, or were not promoted to the next grade.

A recent study by Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), a research-based, not-for-profit organization that supports students and educators worldwide by creating assessment solutions, found significant declines in math achievement across large numbers of students as well as a decline in assessment participation among students of color who already constituted our most at-risk populations (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020).

The Impact of the Pandemic on Schools and Educators

Individual students, cohorts of students, whole schools, whole districts, and a generation of educators are likely to be negatively impacted by the pandemic shutdown. Leaders across America's political landscape make the same prediction.

Shavar Jeffries, president of Democrats for Education Reform recently stated, "We're going to see kids fall further and further behind, particularly low-income students of color. There's potentially a generational level of harm that students have suffered from being out of school for so long" (Mulvihill & Sainz, 2021).

Marco Rubio, Republican Senator from Florida said, "Tens of millions of American children have not stepped inside a physical classroom in nearly a year. In that time, the damage to our students' futures has been catastrophic; isolation, depression and learning loss are only a few of the consequences with which our nation's children are grappling" (Rubio, 2021).

How Can We Expect These Circumstances to Play Out at the School Level?

Consider a hypothetical school of 500 students, elementary, middle, or high, that in 2019 had about 50 recognizably at-risk students. Assume that this 10% of the student body exhibited a range of risk indicators such as below-grade level achievement, poor attendance, unacceptable behaviors, instructional disengagement, and grade retentions. Then imagine the strategies and services that were probably in place to address the needs of that relatively small percentage of the student body in 2019. Imagine yourself as one of the 50 or 60 educators staffing that school and envision what the 2019 school climate might have been like for students and staff.

Then consider that same school in 2022 with those same 50 at-risk students being adversely impacted by pandemic issues, being more academically deficient, more behaviorally challenged, and more likely to be retained in grade. Also remember that most of these students missed a year of the personal attention and wraparound services that they depended on to function as well as they did in 2019. Now add an additional 50 to 100 students who did not exhibit risk indicators in 2019 but who are now traumatized by the pandemic and shutdowns, academically deficient, behaviorally maladapted, and being considered for grade retention. Imagine the strategies and services that will be needed in 2022 to serve this now significantly larger percentage of the student body. Then imagine yourself as one of the 50 or 60 educators working at that school and envision the shift in the school's climate from 2019 to 2022 that everyone will experience.

Consider the challenges that you as an educator would face with a doubling of your at-risk population, increased complexity of student risk conditions, and an over-burdened system

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of student supports. Consider your reaction to declining measures of your school's success such as increased truancy, more behavior infractions, lower percentages of students meeting grade-level standards, slower academic growth rates, increased grade retentions, and lower graduation rates.

What Can We Expect?

We can predict the changes in student at-risk conditions, performance levels, and even graduation rates from the leading indicators of 2020-21. We can also predict how most well-intended teachers, administrators, schools, and districts will react to these challenges.

In the months and years immediately following pandemic shutdowns, we can expect educators and decision makers to continue applying prepandemic policies and practices to the postpandemic environment. Prepandemic expectations, attendance requirements, grading practices, academic assessments, and promotion/retention policies will be continued or slow to change. This phenomenon was noted by Susanne Ceratto, Vice President of the Asheville City Association of Educators, whose district is already seeing a near doubling of grade failures. She states, "The way we're assessing them hasn't changed, but the way in which they've had to learn has" (Patel, 2021).

> "The way we're assessing them hasn't changed, but the way in which they've had to learn has."
>
> Susanne Ceratto, Vice President, Asheville City Association of Educators

We can expect individual teachers, counselors, and administrators to double down on known and existing at-risk interventions (mentoring, tutoring, extended instruction, remediation, credit recovery, therapeutic referrals). When these programs and interventions are unable to correct at-risk conditions or are overwhelmed by increased numbers of students, we can expect to see increased referrals to and requests for placement in alternative programs and schools. Even if schools are able to quickly double or triple in-house at-risk services by doubling or tripling budgeted dollars, we can expect to see a doubling or tripling of referrals to alternative programs and schools.

Postpandemic, we can expect to see America's 10,000+ alternative schools and programs become the "best last chance" for many stressed, trauma-impacted, newly-at-risk, academically deficient, and dropout-prone students. One of many troubling questions for local school systems is, "Can our alternative schools and programs rise to meet the challenge?"

How Prepared Are Our Alternative Programs?

Alternative schools and programs exist in almost every school district in the United States. There are approximately 10,000 alternative schools and programs in the country, with

about half being formally designated as schools and about half functioning as programs within schools. National Center for Education Statistics data indicate that about 3% of the nation's high school students are served by formally designated alternative schools. The National Dropout Prevention Center estimates that an additional 3% are served by alternative programs. These alternative units currently exist in a wide variety of forms and models ranging from disciplinary boot-camp models to self-paced individualized instructional models to therapeutic behavioral modification programs to virtual credit recovery models (Raywid, 1994). For a variety of reasons, many alternative schools serve disproportionately high numbers of students of color, students of poverty, students with disabilities, and males. These units almost always serve the least-likely-to-graduate students and their effectiveness varies widely in terms of behavioral gains, academic achievement, graduation outcomes, and return on investment (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017). It is no surprise that many alternative schools have problems with image, are harder to appropriately staff, and often give rise to a variety of challenges, difficulties, and accountability problems for school leaders.

A postpandemic doubling or tripling of more complex at-risk students that leads to a doubling or tripling of need for and referrals to alternative schools and programs could result in alternative enrollment increases from prepandemic levels of 3 to 6% to postpandemic levels of 10% or higher. If this occurs, two questions will be critical for the local school district:

- *What changes will be necessary for our alternative school(s) to accommodate increased enrollment?*

- *Are our alternative school(s) effective enough to serve and graduate these students?*

Since 1986, the National Dropout Prevention Center has conducted extensive research in the area of alternative education and has assessed the effectiveness of and supported the improvement of several hundred alternative schools and programs.

While the National Dropout Prevention Center has identified numerous alternative programs and schools that are well designed, able to accommodate enrollment shifts, function effectively, and have high graduation rates, these characteristics are not the norm. The National Dropout Prevention Center estimates that no more than half of the nation's alternative schools and programs are well designed, function effectively, and are capable of accommodating enrollment surges. At least as important is the National Dropout Prevention Center's conclusion that half, if not most, alternative schools and programs are not successful with most of their students and do not achieve graduation rates nearly as high as tradtional schools in their home district.

Many of the nation's alternative schools and programs are housed in facilities with limited space and have restrictive budgets. Many districts limit or restrict the enrollment of their alternative schools by establishing quotas or numbers of "slots" that feeder schools may utilize. Limiting the time that students may be served by alternative programs is common practice to achieve "turnover" within limited alternative space.

Alternative units designated as schools typically have reported graduation rates and accountability grades lower than other schools in their home districts. Alternative units that function as programs within schools without their own accountability measures often struggle

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to remediate and graduate their students and account for disproportionately high numbers of their host school's dropouts.

Recommendations

As currently structured, staffed, and funded, most of the nation's alternative schools and programs will not be able to accommodate the increased numbers of at-risk students after the pandemic. At the current levels of effectiveness with at-risk students, many if not most of the nation's alternative schools and programs can be expected to perpetuate below average graduation rates for increased numbers of students and thus be responsible for declining system graduation rates.

The National Dropout Prevention Center recommends that local school districts take the following steps to prepare for and to mitigate the pandemic's impact on at-risk populations, student performance, and district graduation rates.

- *Nurture a culture to support trauma-impacted students and adults in the system to provide a foundation for academic growth.*
- *Assess the likely increases of academically deficient, retained in grade, credit recovery, and otherwise at-risk student populations over the next several years.*
- *Inform staffs, stakeholders, and decision makers of the pandemic's impact on student at-risk conditions, on numbers of at-risk students, and on the need to serve these students.*
- *Assess the capacity of existing at-risk student support services and the likely increased need for alternative school and program capacity.*
- *Review the current system strategic plan in light of pandemic circumstances. Either revise the plan to address new postpandemic challenges and/or develop a specific pandemic recovery plan for the school system.*
- *Strategically plan for the projected need to expand alternative school and program enrollment capacity.*
- *Assess the current effectiveness and track record of alternative schools and programs to meet the needs of and to graduate at-risk students and determine if this level of effectiveness is acceptable in light of increased alternative school/program enrollment.*
- *Identify options and implement strategies for strengthening and improving the effectiveness of alternative schools and programs.*

Resources

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) is a national not-for-profit that offers a number of no-cost or at-cost resources that can help school systems prepare for postpandemic challenges.

- The National Dropout Prevention Center offers both on-site and virtual assessment of local alternative programs that provides school leaders with a clear, research-based, and locally relevant road map for improving the effectiveness of alternative programs. This Alternative Program Assessment and Review is conducted by a team of NDPC staff members who have extensive experience in alternative education and is based on NDPC's Effective Strategies for Alternative School Improvement (2020).

- The National Dropout Prevention Center offers a wide range of professional development events to inform school personnel of at-risk and postpandemic issues.

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These offerings may be delivered virtually or face-to-face and costs reflect NDPC's not-for-profit status.

- National Dropout Prevention Center staff have extensive expertise in risk factor analysis, dropout prevention strategies, and alternative program assessment and redesign for maximum impact on graduation outcomes. These staff members are available to discuss pandemic, trauma, at-risk, and alternative program issues with other educators and may be reached by emailing info@dropoutprevention.org.

- The National Dropout Prevention Center website, www.dropoutprevention.org offers research reports, strategy videos, publications, and alternative school assessment instruments and improvement practice guides, all downloadable at no cost. The NDPC YouTube Channel contains dozens of presentations and broadcasts that can assist educators as they adapt to the post-pandemic environment. NDPC's Model Programs Database is a searchable repository of programs that have been found to be effective with at-risk students, particularly in alternative settings. Also, practitioners may review the work of over 150 Certified National Dropout Prevention Specialists and contact them directly for professional conversations.

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