

## Research-Based Strategies for Dropout Prevention and Re-Engagement

As you determine the best strategies for implementation with your FC 320/324 funds, please ensure that the design, implementation, and scale of work is grounded by a commitment to diversity and equity and ensures that all supports and activities are inclusive and accessible for all students specifically for underserved populations and youth from low-income families.

**Adult Advocates for Student Support:** Research tells us that every student needs a caring adult to connect with in the school. Funds for the FC 320/324 may be used to support the addition of professional staff to work with at-risk students to improve student outcomes through the support prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts at the local level. The adult should be responsible for addressing academic and social needs, communicating with families, advocating for the student, and supporting college and career preparation. Training for adults serving students is integral to this design to ensure that they have the depth of expertise to effectively support at-risk students. The staff person can be (but not limited to) a social worker, case manager, graduation coach, re-engagement coach, mentor or advisor. In addition to providing academic and personal support for students at risk of not obtaining a high school diploma, these staff can assist with parent and family engagement strategies and individualized plans for graduation and beyond.

**Contextual Learning Opportunities:** Contextual learning occurs when teachers relate subject matter to real world situations. Students are motivated to make connections between knowledge and its applications to their lives as family members, citizens, and workers. When students recognize the connection between their schooling and the impact that it has on their success in the workforce, they tend to become more focused and engaged learners. These activities can be key dropout prevention and reengagement strategies.

**Service-learning** is a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. By connecting service to academic coursework, students are afforded the chance to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills to make a difference in their communities, making learning more relevant.

**Work-based Learning** includes paid and unpaid experiences such as internships and apprenticeships as well as capstone projects. Work-based learning can help young people gain the knowledge, skills, and credentials they need to enter and succeed in careers. Work-based learning is beneficial for all young people but can be especially useful for individuals from underserved populations including low-income students and others who may otherwise not have access to the career exposure, educational opportunities, professional networks, and social capital that often plays a critical role in career success.

**Expansion of the school year/ structured learning time and summer transition programs:** Many students who are in danger of or who have dropped out are often overage and have severe academic deficits, such as being under-credited toward high school graduation or lacking literacy, numeracy, and other academic skills.

Funds may be used to provide programming aimed at providing support to develop academic skills, accelerate learning and earn credits toward graduation in a structured program that is run beyond the school day or in the summer. These expanded learning time opportunities may also provide enrichment and socio-emotional supports to increase school engagement and prepare students for academic success. These interventions should be designed to promote and maintain positive attitudes, anticipate and prevent

problems and provide special assistance to those whose problems may manifest themselves more greatly at the high school level.

Funds may also be used to provide summer transition programs for students entering high school for the first time to provide a bridge toward what can sometimes be a more complex and less nurturing high school environment and provide students at-risk for dropping out with tools and support to be successful.

**Pathway Development:** Pathways for college and career readiness and civic engagement are intentional educational structures within a school system that enable students to build agency, identify personal interests, strengths and talents, identify career interests aligned with those strengths and talents and understand the connection of academic learning and future success. All Pathways should provide a variety of experiences that better inform future career and life choices so students create individual post-secondary plans that are authentic, meaningful and attainable. My Career and Academic Plan (MyCAP) is a process that supports this development. There are five recommended guiding principles to ensure a strong pathway program:

**Guiding Principle 1: Equitable Access**

*All Pathway programs should be accessible to all students and therefore designed and created to ensure that historically underrepresented students are included. To facilitate this, programs should be structured to eliminate barriers and provide multiple entry points for students, along with a variety of student supports to prepare students for entry into and success throughout the program.*

**Guiding Principle 2: Guided Academic Pathways**

*Pathways should be structured around clear and detailed student academic pathways from secondary to post-secondary education with regard to coursework, sequencing, and experiences beyond the classroom.*

**Guiding Principle 3: Enhanced Student Support**

*Pathways should identify potential academic and nonacademic challenges for all potential student participants and incorporate wraparound services to promote academic success and course completion, taking into consideration the needs of diverse populations of students.*

**Guiding Principle 4: Connection to Career**

*Pathways should expose students to a variety of career opportunities through a career development sequence - beginning with awareness activities and advancing into exploration and including immersion opportunities in their identified careers of interest. The connections may include targeted workforce and career skills development, career counseling, and elements of experiential and work-based learning.*

**Guiding Principle 5: Effective Partnerships**

*To offer authentic, real world exposure, schools should develop partnerships with one or more of the following: a workforce development ([MassHire](#)) board, a post-secondary education institution, a local chamber of commerce, and/or one or more employers in the local area.*

**School Culture and Behavioral Health:** Many issues with disengaged students and those who may be at risk of dropping out are not academic in nature and therefore require non-academic systems of support. Students' behavioral health is intricately connected to academic, social, and emotional success at school. Establishing a school climate that promotes students' behavioral health can also help promote positive and productive functioning and school success. Behavioral health refers to the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of all students, including students with mental health needs. It is important that these needs are being met.

If funds will be used to address these needs they may be used to:

- Assist students to identify, understand, and self-regulate their emotions and interactions with peers and adults. These skills can help to mitigate problematic and disruptive behavior both in

and out of the classroom by teaching students how to positively interact and communicate. This programming may also be used to teach students strategies to strengthen problem solving and decision-making skills.

- Establish partnerships with community-based program providers and other agencies such as social services, child welfare, mental and physical health, and law enforcement. The intent of this programming will be to address the root causes of problematic classroom and school behavior or mental health needs.
- Develop a strong family engagement structure that will improve the family – school connection and build a solid student support infrastructure.
- Implement the [Behavioral Health and Public Schools Framework](#). The Framework emphasizes the importance of establishing and enhancing the three levels of behavioral health, which mirror the layered approach of dropout prevention and re-engagement:
  - 1) *supportive school environments* that promote the behavioral health of all students through whole-school supportive environments, 2) *early interventions* that provide collaborative approaches to identify and address behavioral health symptoms early, and 3) *intensive services* that coordinate intensive interventions for students with significant needs.

**Programs and systems specifically designed to serve transient students, including migrant students, English Learners, refugees, immigrants, and other newcomers**

Housing mobility for economic, family, migratory, or other (often undesirable) reasons can cause severe interruptions in student academic and support services – leading towards a disconnect with schooling and the inherent social supports that may be available. (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). There is strong evidence that mobility during high school diminishes the prospects for graduation for all students. Massachusetts cohort graduation rate data shows striking differences between students that attend one high school versus students that attend more than one Massachusetts high school. Students that attend one high school have a cohort graduation rate of 85.9 percent, compared to students that attend two high schools (62.4 percent), students that attend three high schools (39.8 percent), and students that attend four or more high schools (24.9 percent) (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010). Funds may be used to create programs, provide supports and targeted assistance to students with housing instability.

Federal law requires states and local school districts to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs. This funding may be used for programming that serves English Learner students with low English proficiency, particularly for those students who may have little or no literacy in their first language (Short & Boyson, 2010). These programs are intended to accelerate English language acquisition, develop academic content vocabulary and higher-level thinking skills, promote the development of social and academic skills that students will need when entering district high schools, build a foundation for long-term academic and socio-cultural success, and serve as a learning site for best practices in educating secondary school English Language Learners who have interrupted schooling or gaps in their formal education.