



# Increasing Student Retention in Online High Schools

# District Leadership Forum

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# 1) Executive Summary

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## Key Observations

**Contacts at profiled schools report high—above 80 percent—course completion rates and year-to-year retention rates.** At School A—which established its full-time, high school program in the 2017-2018 year—contacts report a 95 percent retention rate of full-time students from 2017-2018 to 2018-2019. Contacts report a 100 percent retention rate of full-time students from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020. When School C first enrolled students in the 2008-2009 school year, contacts report that course completion rates hovered in the low 80<sup>th</sup> percentile (e.g., 80.1 percent in the 2008-2009 year). Contacts report a 92-93 percent course completion rate during the 2018-2019 year. No profiled school currently sets a formal success benchmark for retention rate.

**To promote course completion, non-teaching staff should regularly check in with students to monitor course progress.** At School A, School B, and School E, multiple staff members (e.g., counselors, advisors, director) conduct student engagement check-ins to identify potential challenges students face and propose appropriate supports and interventions. For example, counselors at School A and the program coordinator at School B provide structured study hall sessions via videoconference for students who struggle with time management and organization. In these study hall sessions at School A, counselors may assist students with dividing an assignment into components, allocating a specific amount of time per component, and holding students accountable to these time allocations as they work on each component in real-time.

**Track student engagement through the learning management system (LMS) to identify students who may be at risk for course incompleteness.** At School B, administrators track student progress in courses through the LMS, Canvas. If a student earns a “0” on an assignment, Canvas sends an automatic notification email to the deans and program coordinator. Similarly, at School E, administrators monitor indicators of student engagement through the LMS, including students’ submission of assignments, projects, and exams and teachers’ notes from teacher-student interactions. At both School B and School E, dedicated staff members (e.g., deans, principal) follow up with students to troubleshoot challenges (e.g., poor study habits, organization). By tracking student activity and engagement in a course, administrators can proactively identify and follow up with struggling students.

**Build student-teacher relationships to increase student engagement and promote course success.** At School B, administrators require all new students to complete a three-day orientation program. Administrators invite students to come to Institution B’s brick-and-mortar campus to meet with their teachers and classmates. Online students who cannot attend the in-person orientation connect with teachers virtually. At School C, teachers conduct a welcome call and a follow-up call one week afterwards with each student at the beginning of each course. In these calls, teachers learn about students’ strengths, interests, and motivations for course enrollment. With this information, teachers can tailor support to each individual student. At School A and School C, teachers maintain open channels of communications with students through regular office hours. During office hours, teachers can clarify concepts, re-teach content, and direct students to additional resources.

## 2) Measures of Student Retention

### Retention in Online Schools

#### Online Schools Grow Enrollments, But Many Struggle to Retain Students

In the U.S., K-12 students are increasingly enrolling in full-time online learning schools, which operate in 39 states. Almost 300,000 students enrolled in 501 full-time online schools in the 2017-2018 school year.<sup>1</sup>

However, research by the National Education Policy Center (NECP) shows that many online schools struggle to retain their students. NECEP reports significantly lower on-time graduation rates at online schools compared with the national average for public schools. Specifically, using data from 290 full-time online schools, researchers found that online schools demonstrate an average graduation rate of 50.1 percent, compared to the national average for public schools of 85 percent.<sup>3</sup> In the state of Colorado, over half (i.e., 5,600) of the 10,500 students enrolled at the largest online programs in fall 2008 withdrew from their online schools by fall 2009.<sup>4</sup>

This report profiles online schools that lie outside of the above trend—contacts report retention rates above 80 percent—and presents their strategies to increase retention of students in online courses and programs.

**5 million**

out of 54 million total K-12 students in the U.S. have taken at least one online course.<sup>2</sup>

### Calculating Retention

#### Monitor Year-to-Year Retention for Full-Time Students

Contacts at School A, School B, and School D state that administrators measure year-to-year retention for their full-time, online students.

Since full-time students at School A follow a structured school year, administrators conduct an enrollment headcount each fall. Administrators divide fall year 1 enrollment by fall year 2 enrollment.

- For example, if 50 students enrolled in fall 2017 and 48 of those students re-enrolled in fall 2018, administrators at School A would divide 48 by 50 to obtain a year-to-year retention rate of 0.96, or **96 percent**.

Although most full-time students at School B also follow a structured school year (e.g., September to June), administrators do offer rolling admissions. For example, a few full-time students may enroll in the middle of the school year (e.g., January). Thus, administrators at School B, in June, count the total number of students who enrolled across the school year. Administrators then divide the number of students enrolled the following fall by this number.

- For example, if 50 students enrolled in the program across the 2017-2018 school year, and 48 of these students re-enrolled in the program in fall 2018, administrators at School B would divide 48 by 50 to obtain a retention rate of 0.96, or **96 percent**.

Administrators at School D use the attrition rate formula recommended by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). This formula can be found on **page 3** of the [2002 NAIS Attrition Study](#).

1) Emily Tate, "Despite Poor Performance, Virtual School Enrollment Continues to Grow," *EdSurge*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-05-28-despite-poor-performance-virtual-school-enrollment-continues-to-grow>.  
2) Darren Samuelsohn, "Who's Paying Attention?," *Politico*, September 23, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/agenda/story/2015/09/virtual-schools-education-000227>.  
3) Alex Molnar, "Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2019," *National Education Policy Center*, May 2019, <https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Virtual%20Schools%202019.pdf>; "Public High School Graduation Rates," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipedsdatatools/indicators/col.asp>.  
4) Burt Hubbard and Nancy Mitchell, "Troubling Questions About Online Education," *Chalkbeat*, October 4, 2011, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2011/10/04/analysis-shows-half-of-online-students-leave-programs-within-a-year-but-funding-stays/>.

Contacts at School D and School A report that administrators adjust year-to-year retention calculation to account for part-time, online students who become full-time, online students as well as full-time, online students who transfer to the brick-and-mortar campus, respectively.

## Strategies to Account for Transfer Students in Full-Time Retention Rate Calculations at School D and School A



### Part-Time Students Who Transfer to Full-Time

- Administrators at School D include these students in calculations of full-time student retention from one year to the next.

#### Example:

- 90 out of 100 full-time students retained from Year 1 to Year 2.
- Two part-time students in Year 1 enrolled as full-time students in Year 2.
- Administrators would perform the following calculation to obtain retention from Year 1 to Year 2:  $(90 + 2) / 100 = 0.92$  (92 percent)



### Full-Time Students Who Transfer to the Brick-and-Mortar Campus

- At School A, full-time students in the online program may choose to enroll as full-time students at the brick-and-mortar campus (Institution A comprises an online and in-person campus). Since these students remain with the institution, administrators count them as "full-time retained" in calculations of year-to-year retention.

#### Example:

- 45 out of 50 full-time, online students retained in the online program from Year 1 to Year 2.
- Three full-time, online students chose to transfer to the brick-and-mortar campus after Year 1.
- Administrators would perform the following calculation to obtain retention from Year 1 to Year 2:  $(45 + 3) / 50 = 0.96$  (96 percent)

In contrast, administrators at School C do not measure year-to-year retention because administrators do not set an established academic year start and end date. (Students can choose to start their courses at any point in the year.)



### Consider Deprioritizing Year-to-Year Retention Calculations for Part-Time Students

Contacts at School B state that administrators do not prioritize tracking year-to-year retention for part-time students. Contacts explain that part-time students at School B often take one-off courses that their other learning organization (e.g., local, brick-and-mortar school) does not provide. Thus, administrators do not expect part-time students to necessarily return to the online program the following year upon completion of these one-off courses.

## Monitor Course Completion Rates for All Students

Administrators at all profiled schools track course completion rates for full-time and part-time students.

## Two Strategies to Calculate Course Completion Rates

- 1 Divide the number of completed courses by the number of attempted courses—across all students—in a single school year.**

- *Strategy used by:* School B, School C

### *Example*

- In one school year, students overall attempted **100** courses and completed **90** courses.
- Perform the following calculation for course completion rate:  **$90 / 100 = 0.90$  (90 percent)**.

- 2 Calculate a completion rate for each course. Average all course-specific completion rates for an overall course completion rate for the program.**

- *Strategy recommended by:* EAB's [Course Completion Playbook](#)

### *Example*

- A school offers three courses: Course A, Course B, and Course C. At the census date (e.g., October 1), **100** students were enrolled in Course A. **90** of those students completed that course (i.e., received course credit).
- Perform the following calculation for course completion rate of Course A:  **$90 / 100 = 0.90$  (90 percent)**.
- Course B had a course completion rate of **80 percent** and Course C had a completion rate of **95 percent**.
- Perform the following calculation to obtain overall course completion rate at the school:  **$(90 + 80 + 95) / 3 = 88.3$  percent**.

Notably, at School C, administrators start measuring course completion rate after the first 28 days of a student starting a course. Administrators do not count students as enrolled in the course until the 29<sup>th</sup> day. Administrators set this course start date as the date of the welcome call between teacher and student (for more information on welcome calls at School C, see **page 20**). Contacts state that these first 28 days represent a “grace period” where students can add and/or drop classes. During this period, administrators and teachers encourage students to determine if their selected course(s) and the overall program (for full-time students) align with their interests, expectations, and goals.

At School C, when a student completes the course, the teacher logs this completion in the learning management system (LMS). Administrators use the LMS to automatically track course completion rates.

## Retention Trends

## Profiled Schools Report High Course Completion and/or Retention Rates

Contacts at multiple profiled schools report overall high (i.e., above 80 percent) course completion and retention rates.

## Retention Rates and/or Course Completion Rates at Profiled Schools

### School A



- At School A—which established its full-time, high school program in the 2017-2018 year—contacts report a **95 percent** retention rate of full-time students from the 2017-2018 to 2018-2019 year.
- Contacts report a **100 percent** retention rate of full-time students from the 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 year.

### School C



- Contacts report that, when School C was first established, course completion rates were in the low **80<sup>th</sup> percentile**. For example, contacts report a course completion rate of 80.1 percent in the 2008-2009 year.
- In the 2018-2019 school year, course completion rate was **92-93 percent**.

\*Contacts at School D declined to provide course completion rates. However, contacts report that attrition rates at School D are lower than at peer independent schools. Contacts at School B declined to share year-to-year retention rates for full-time students and course completion rates. Contacts at School E declined to provide course completion rates or year-to-year retention rates. Contacts cite a competitive market of online programs in their decision to withhold these data.

## Full-Time Students Generally Demonstrate Higher Course Completion Rates Than Their Part-Time Peers

At School C and School E, contacts report anecdotally that full-time students are more likely to complete their courses than part-time students. Contacts note that full-time students tend to show a higher level of engagement due to their commitment to a full-time program.

However, contacts at School E do not assume that any given part-time student will be automatically less likely to complete their courses than any given full-time student at School E, due to the diverse motivations and accountability circumstances that part-time students may bring to an online program. For example, if a part-time student is simultaneously enrolled in another school—such as a local, brick-and-mortar school—the student may report to a staff member at their local school who holds them accountable for consistent activity and performance in School E online course(s). Contacts do note, however, that part-time students who do not have an accountability support beyond their parents may complete courses at a lower rate.

Administrators at School C have not yet quantitatively measured differences in course completion rates between part-time and full-time students. Administrators are currently building a data warehouse so that they can break down course completion rates by and within student subgroups.

Among both full-time and part-time students, however, contacts at School E state that administrators do anecdotally observe lower course completion rates in more rigorous, advanced courses (e.g., Advanced Placement (AP)), compared to introductory courses.

## Success Benchmarks

## Most Profiled Schools Do Not Set Formal Success Benchmarks for Retention or Course Completion Rates

Administrators at School B, School C, School D, and School E do not set formal success benchmarks for year-to-year retention rates or course completion rates. Contacts at School E emphasize that administrators' priority is to best serve students. Contacts at School E report that if administrators were to set retention benchmarks, staff might attempt to keep students in the program even when those students might perform better at other schools.



Administrators at School C—at the inception of the charter school’s establishment in 2007—established a course completion target (i.e., number of completed courses divided by number of attempted courses) of 80 percent, which administrators sought to achieve within five years. Students achieved this course completion target within two years—contacts report a course completion rate of 80.1 percent for the 2008-2009 year. With the current course completion rate at 92-93 percent, contacts explain that administrators have recently shifted from trying to marginally increase the course completion rate to determining how to analyze trends in course completion among specific student subgroups.

At School A, administrators have not yet set a formal retention rate/course completion goal. That said, contacts anticipate that administrators may set a formal goal within the next year.



### **Task Senior-Level Administrator(s) to Monitor Retention Rates to Elevate Student Success as an Institutional Priority**

At School B and School D, staff members in Admissions and the Office of the Registrar logistically track retention rates. At both profiled schools and at School E, senior-level administrators also monitor these rates to gauge student outcomes across the school. For example, the head of school at School B and the assistant director for curriculum, principal, and director at School E monitor and analyze retention rates. By allocating this responsibility of tracking retention rates to one or more senior-level administrators, administrators elevate institutional accountability for student outcomes.

### 3) Identifying and Supporting At-Risk Students

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#### Identifying At-Risk Students

#### **Task Multiple Staff Members to Match Students with Course Supports and Interventions**

At School A and School E, multiple staff members (e.g., counselors, advisors, recruiters) conduct student engagement check-ins to identify potential challenges and propose appropriate supports (i.e., proactive measures such as asking for course feedback to gauge student's progress) and interventions (i.e., reactive measures such as mandated study hall sessions and academic progress monitoring). Contacts at School E emphasize that a holistic approach—one that involves not only teachers but also administrators—demonstrates to students and their parents that student success represents an institutional priority.

## Staff-Led Student Support Check-In Structures at Profiled Schools

At School A, the counselor meets with every student—contacts emphasize that this norm mitigates any potential stigma associated with working with a counselor.

Staff Member	Frequency of Meeting	Supports Provided During Meetings
<b>Counselor</b>  Supports students' academic, emotional, and social needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At School A, each student meets with the counselor at least once a month. Most students meet with the counselor twice a month, and some meet with the counselor every week (based on student need and request).</li> <li>At School D, counselors tailor meeting frequency to student need. For example, counselors use a "fading scaffold support approach," in which counselors conduct fewer meetings as the student gains increasingly more confidence and competence in the course.<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asks students for their perceptions on their performance in the class to identify potential areas of support</li> <li>Solicits feedback from the student on their courses and workload and reaches out to teachers if needed (e.g., counselor requests an assignment extension on the student's behalf)</li> <li>Teaches strategies for academic success (e.g., study habits, time management skills)</li> </ul>
<b>Advisor</b>  Works with full-time students to create a path to graduation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At School A, School D, and School E, students meet with the advisor once or twice a year.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tracks full-time students' progress towards graduation goals, records student goals for postsecondary education, and assists with course selection process to ensure progress towards these goals</li> <li>May also provide strategies to improve student academic success, such as testing tips, how to prepare for projects, study habits, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Other Staff Members</b>  Recruiter, Dean	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At School E, a recruiter connects monthly with each student via call.</li> <li>At School B, a dean connects with students and/or parents when they notice a decline in student course activity or performance.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Recruiter (School E)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides general, high-level support (e.g., words of encouragement)</li> <li>Workshops non-subject-related student challenges (e.g., difficulty navigating the LMS)</li> </ul> <p><b>Dean (School B)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reviews all students' assignments and overall course grades each week</li> <li>Reaches out via email, call, or videoconference to at-risk students (e.g., students who are missing many assignments) and their parents to determine root causes and workshop challenges</li> </ul>

In follow-up to student engagement check-ins, staff members at the above profiled schools provide proactive supports and/or reactive interventions to students.

- Staff members may offer referrals to school-specific resources and/or outside support services. For example, counselors at School D may direct students to schedule a meeting with a peer tutor in a specific subject area or meet with external mental health professionals and learning specialists.

5) "Student Support," School D, accessed January 6, 2020.

- Counselors at School A and the program coordinator at School B provide structured study hall via videoconference to students who struggle with time management and organization. In structured study hall sessions at School A, counselors may assist students in breaking down assignments into manageable parts—such as dividing an essay outline into separate components and allocating a specific amount of time per component. Counselors then hold students accountable to these time allocations as they work on each component in real-time.

## **Provide Regular Updates to Staff and Parents About Student Progress**

Advisors at School D and the principal at School E provide regular (e.g., every three to four weeks) grade notification emails to students and their parents (and to counselors if the student is struggling in one or more courses) to ensure that parents and staff alike can identify if their students are at risk of failing to complete their courses. In these emails, the principal at School E also summarizes students' strengths and challenges and suggests areas for improvement (e.g., time management). For students who are struggling in a course, advisors at School D encourage students and parents to reach out directly to the specific course teacher to diagnose areas of challenge and identify strategies to boost their course grade.

At School A, administrators rely on a centralized platform to communicate updates on student progress to relevant staff. Specifically, the school's counselor manages a Microsoft Teams platform to provide periodic updates on student progress to other staff members, including teachers and the program director. Through Microsoft Teams, staff at School A effectively centralize internal communications on each student's progress and assign student interventions, as needed, to appropriate staff members.

## Administrators at School A Streamline Communications on Student Progress and Interventions Through Microsoft Teams



### Create Student-Specific Groups

At the beginning of the year, the counselor creates a messaging group—via Microsoft Teams—for each student that involves the counselor, all of the student’s teachers, and the online program director.



### Provide Periodic Student Updates

Throughout the year, the counselor provides updates on student progress and challenges from regular (e.g., monthly, biweekly, weekly) check-ins. The counselor may also inform staff members of non-academic updates (e.g., family emergency) that might impact a student’s course performance.



### Triage Interventions

The counselor requests that teachers and the director intervene with the student if needed.

### Example Interventions

- If the counselor learns that a student is experiencing challenges with navigating the learning platform or setting up technology (e.g., videoconference software), the counselor alerts the teacher so that the teacher can reach out to the student to remedy the problem.
- If the counselor learns of an incident that could require discipline (e.g., bullying), they alert the teacher to follow up with the student(s) involved.
- If the counselor receives feedback on unsustainable workload from one student—and has heard similar feedback from the student’s classmates—the counselor notifies the teacher to learn about their homework expectations and share student feedback. The director, then, may work with the teacher to make necessary curricular changes to reduce homework load.
- The director meets with a student to address repeated incidences of non-academic problems (e.g., consistently low course participation, repeated bullying, parent consistently interrupting live sessions).

## Use Student Course Activity Data from the LMS to Monitor Student Engagement

Administrators at School B and School E use their schools’ LMS’ to track student engagement and identify struggling students who may be at risk for course incompleteness.

For more information on LMSs, review the EAB report [LMS Selection and Implementation](#).

## Use of LMS to Track Student Engagement and Proactively Identify At-Risk Students at School E and School B

### School E

- **LMS:** Created in-house
- **Course activity:** Administrators track students' submission of assignments (e.g., projects) and exams; saved—but not yet submitted—assignments; and teachers' notes from teacher-student interactions and feedback on assignments.
- **Follow-up:** The principal sends grade notification emails to each student and their parents each month. In these emails, the principal uses progress data points to highlight the student's unique strengths, challenges, and specific strategies (e.g., time management tips) students can use to improve performance in the course.



### School B

- **LMS:** [Canvas](#)
- **Missing assignments:** If a student earns a "0" on an assignment, Canvas sends an automatic notification email to the deans and program coordinator.
- **Course progress:** Administrators use Canvas-generated reports of the number of missing assignments a student has and of overall grades.
- **Follow-up:** The teacher, deans, and program coordinator then triage follow-up with students based on the students' number of missing assignments across subject areas.

## Interventions for At-Risk Students

### Administrators at Profiled Schools Do Not Report Customized Interventions for Specific Student Subgroups

Contacts at School E state that each subgroup (e.g., full-time students, part-time students, student-athletes, students with learning disabilities) includes students with diverse educational needs and motivations. Thus, contacts at School E caution against drawing generalized correlations between specific subgroups and "at-risk" likelihood. Administrators at School E—in addition to School A—do not design interventions to target the needs of, for example, their part-time student population or student-athlete population.

Instead, administrators at School A and School D define at-risk students as those who demonstrate an overall course grade below a certain threshold. For example, administrators at School A and School D consider students who have below a "C" and "C-", respectively, as at risk for course incompleteness.

### Schedule Teacher Meetings to Help Teachers Coordinate Supports for At-Risk Students

Administrators at School B arrange teacher online meetings once a trimester to review students' grades, share concerns about specific struggling students, and brainstorm how to best support these students (e.g., design interventions). In a brick-and-mortar school, contacts note that teachers would typically engage in informal and regular in-person conversations with each other in shared physical spaces (e.g., staff room, cafeteria) on how to best support specific, struggling students. In contrast, in an online learning community, teachers do not have this in-person time and space naturally built into their daily schedule. Thus, contacts at

School B emphasize the importance of periodic, online teacher meetings as an intentional space to collaboratively troubleshoot student-related challenges and determine appropriate supports and interventions.

At School B, School C, and School D, administrators ask teachers to offer direct support to students. At these profiled schools, this support can include either academic tutoring to struggling students or explicit social-emotional learning (SEL) training for all students. Through this direct support, teachers can increase student academic and SEL outcomes—ultimately promoting retention.

## Examples of Direct Academic and SEL Support Provided by Teachers at Profiled Schools



### Provide Academic Tutoring to Increase Students' Understanding of Course Material

- Teachers at School B and School C provide one-on-one tutoring opportunities in specific subjects (e.g., math). With this additional academic support, struggling students are more likely to increase their grades and pass their courses.



### Implement Wellness Program to Boost All Students' Outcomes

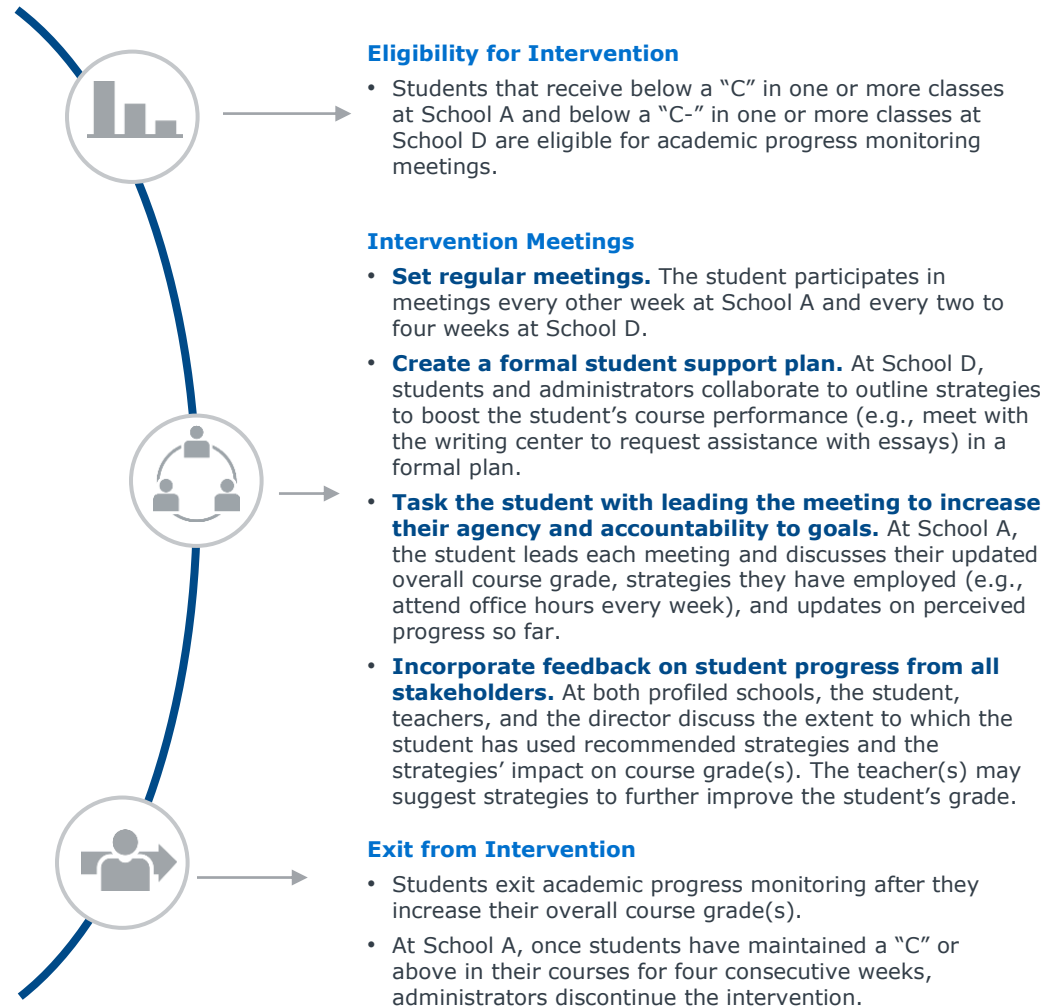
At School D, teachers run a ninth-grade wellness program, in which they meet regularly with students in groups to discuss topics related to social and emotional learning, such as interpersonal connections and time management. By increasing students' social and emotional wellness, administrators can boost student outcomes and retention.

For more information on how to teach students self-regulation through mindfulness and establish a growth mindset in students, refer to **pages 64-69** of EAB's [Tackling the Student Stress Dilemma](#).

## Consider Implementing Academic Progress Monitoring to Hold Students Accountable for Performance-Improvement Strategies

Administrators at both School A and School D provide academic interventions for at-risk students through regular intervention meetings (via videoconference) that include the student, teacher, director, and counselor. In these meetings, teachers and administrators provide intensive, tailored support for at-risk students, which helps increase student academic outcomes and ultimately boost course completion likelihood.

## Academic Progress Monitoring Structure at School A and School D



Contacts at School A emphasize that administrators frame academic progress monitoring as a helpful support, rather than as a punitive action. For example, in the notification email regarding academic progress monitoring that administrator send to students and parents, administrators emphasize the school’s priority of “providing a supportive learning environment that encourages academic risk and growth” (reference **Appendix** for a sample notification email).<sup>6</sup>

## Addressing Stop-Outs and Dropouts

### Track Root Causes of Stop-outs and Dropouts to Identify Potential Areas of Program Improvement

Contacts at School A, School B, and School D emphasize the importance of diagnosing root causes that lead a student to withdraw permanently (drop out) or temporarily (stop out) from the online program. By understanding reasons for program withdrawal, administrators may identify areas of improvement for the program for all students.

6) Notification of Academic Progress Monitoring, School A, provided December 3, 2019.



At School B, deans closely track each student's grades, conduct check-ins with students, and connect students with academic and/or social and emotional support resources (e.g., mandated study hall sessions, time-management coaching, counseling). Thus, contacts state that when a student decides to withdraw from the program, that student has typically already demonstrated low course engagement and activity for a period of time (e.g., a few months) and/or worked with their deans on specific challenges for some time. Thus, administrators are almost always aware of the student's challenges when the student chooses to withdraw from the program.

However, when students withdraw from the program unexpectedly, administrators at School B—such as deans and the director—conduct exit interviews with students' parents via phone to understand their reasons. At School D, administrators also conduct exit interviews to understand students' motivations for stopping the program.

Contacts at profiled schools cite multiple factors—including academic and non-academic factors—that could lead a student to drop out of an online program.

## Examples of Rationale for Withdrawal from Online Programs at Profiled Schools

1

### Scheduling Limitations

- **Decreased flexibility due to scheduling of live sessions.** Because School A is based in the West Coast and most students live on the West Coast, administrators schedule all live sessions in the morning, Pacific Time. Thus, students attend live sessions in the morning and then complete asynchronous coursework in the afternoon.
- Some students require more flexibility in scheduling. For example, a student-athlete who lived on the East Coast transferred to a boarding school that allowed for more schedule flexibility to incorporate sports practice. A part-time student (who was also enrolled in her local, brick-and-mortar school) dropped out of School A because she wanted to participate in her local school's marching band, which conflicted with the live sessions.

2

### Social Factors

- **Difficulty of peer socialization in an online learning environment.** Contacts at multiple profiled schools note that some students cite challenges with peer socialization in a virtual environment (e.g., feeling isolated).

3

### Academic Factors

- **Poor fit with learning style.** Contacts at multiple profiled schools state that some students withdraw from the program simply because they prefer in-person instruction over online learning.
- **Misalignment of academic rigor of program with student goals.** Contacts at School B note that one student decided that she wanted to attend a less selective university and thus sought a high school with less rigorous requirements.

**Asynchronous** learning is self-paced and refers to recorded lectures and seminars and other on-demand, pre-existing resources (e.g., virtual libraries, self-guided lesson modules). In comparison, **synchronous** learning occurs in real-time. Synchronous learning methods include videoconference, teleconference, live chats, and lectures streamed in real-time.

For more information on socialization opportunities, see **page 21**.

Once staff members diagnose reasons for program withdrawal, administrators can then identify potential areas of program improvement, such as new supports for students and policy changes. (Note that not all factors that may lead a student to drop out of the program—such as mismatch between online learning approach and student's learning style—are in administrators' control.) For example, to remedy the challenge of peer socialization, administrators should intentionally implement opportunities for students to interact with each other, such as through student clubs and school-wide events. To overcome scheduling limitations, contacts at School A note that administrators may seek to schedule some live sessions earlier to accommodate the schedules of students based on the East Coast.

At School C, the counseling department continues to make consistent contact with dropouts and stop-outs via emails and calls to encourage those students to reenroll. Contacts note that counselors stop outreach efforts to students if students request that they do so.

## 4) Schoolwide Culture

### Role of Teachers

For more information on fostering meaningful connections between students and teachers, see EAB's toolkit [Promoting Positive Adult-Student Connections](#).

At School B, orientation comprises academic, social, and cultural activities. For example, during the 2017-2018 orientation, students participated in icebreakers to get to know each other (e.g., an improv class), heard advice from returning students (e.g., time management tips), learned about the school's four-year approach to college admissions, and attended a student activities fair. Students also participated in a sightseeing tour of the city.<sup>8</sup>

### Cultivate Student-Teacher Relationships to Increase Student Engagement and Success in Courses

Contacts at School A, School B, and School C emphasize the importance of building student-teacher relationships to increase student engagement and promote course completion. Robust research literature demonstrates the connection between strong teacher-student relationships and short-term and long-term gains in students' academic engagement, attendance, and grades.<sup>7</sup>

### Student-Teacher Relationship-Building Strategies at Profiled Schools

#### Provide Orientation for New Students to Meet Teachers



- At School B, administrators require all new students to complete a three-day orientation program. Administrators invite students to come to Institution B's brick-and-mortar campus to meet with their teachers. Online students who cannot make the in-person orientation connect with teachers virtually to complete some orientation activities.
- Returning students participate in a shortened orientation.

#### Maintain Open Channels of Communication



- At School A and School C, teachers hold regular office hours. During office hours, teachers can clarify concepts, re-teach content, and direct students to additional resources. At School C, students can also set up appointments with teachers outside of office hours.
- At School A, students can communicate with teachers via an internal messaging platform at any time of the day during school hours.

#### Integrate Student Feedback Exercises in Self-Paced, Asynchronous Courses



- At School E, every teacher conducts six student-teacher interactions throughout the asynchronous, self-paced course. For example, at the start of the unit, a math teacher may ask students to provide a written statement about their experience with studying math in the past.
- Through student feedback exercises, teachers may learn about students' previous experience in the subject and their course goals. This information can help teachers connect with their students.

#### Work with Parents to Identify Students' Strengths and Challenges



- Teachers at School C meet with students and their parents once a month via videoconference.
- Teachers at School B host virtual parent-teacher conferences once a trimester.
- During these meetings, teachers share updates on student progress. Teachers and parents can discuss how to best address students' challenges.

Contacts at School C note, anecdotally, when teachers make themselves accessible to answer student's questions and prioritize regular contact with students and parents, teachers are significantly more likely to see higher retention in their courses.

7) Sarah D Sparks, "Why Teacher-Student Relationships Matter," *Education Week*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/03/13/why-teacher-student-relationships-matter.html>; Bridget K Hamre and Robert C Pianta, *Children's Needs III: Development, Prevention, and Intervention* (National Association of School Psychologists, 2006), 59-71. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2006-03571-005>; Dawn M Decker, Daria Paul Dona, and Sandra L Christenson, "Behaviorally At-Risk African American Students: The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships for Student Outcomes," *Journal of School Psychology*, no. 45 (2007). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022440506000872>.

8) Article on orientation, School B, accessed January 6, 2020.

To further foster connections between teachers and students, administrators at School C ask teachers to conduct a welcome call and a follow-up call one week afterwards with each student at the beginning of each course. Contacts at School C note that welcome calls allow teachers to learn about students' strengths, challenges, interests, and motivations for course enrollment. With this information, teachers can tailor support to each individual student. Contacts note that many successful online schools—such as Florida Virtual School (with whom administrators connected when initially designing School C)—use this practice.

## Welcome Call and Follow-Up Practice at School C



### Welcome Call

- **Length:** 20 to 30 minutes
- **Participants:** Student, parent(s), teacher
- **Topics discussed:** course logistics and expectations (e.g., frequency of live sessions, how to upload weekly assignments), student's interests, student's strengths and weaknesses, preferences for parent communications
- **Follow-up:** After the welcome call, administrators officially activate the course



### Follow-Up Call

- **Length:** 20 to 30 minutes
- **Participants:** Student, teacher, parents (optional)
- **Topics discussed:** student's motivation for taking the course, student's goals (course-specific or more general), student's experience with the subject

## Clearly Communicate Course Expectations Ensure Students Understand Their Responsibilities

Teachers at online programs should clearly articulate course expectations (e.g., submission deadlines, grading criteria) to help instill productive behaviors in students. Teachers should also clarify expectations related to succeeding in an online learning environment for students new to online courses. Contacts at School A and School C state that students who understand their course responsibilities and program expectations may be more likely to complete the course.

Contacts at School B and School C integrate initial course expectation-setting into activities that help foster relationships between students and teachers. School B's orientation allows students to meet with and get to know their teachers, but also includes programming designed to help set expectations for student work in online courses. At School C, teachers use welcome calls both to develop relationships with and communicate course expectations to students.

At School A, teachers and counselors reinforce expectations on a weekly basis. Teachers at School A post all assignments for the following week by 2 pm on Fridays. The counselor then holds office hours at 3 pm to meet with students to plan out their to-do lists and update their planners for the following week. Contacts note that this strategy helps students understand and manage their weekly responsibilities and ultimately increases the likelihood of overall course completion.

### Provide Opportunities for Students to Interact with Their Peers During and Outside of Courses

Contacts at School A and School B emphasize the importance of building an active virtual student body to boost retention rates. Specifically, contacts state that students who are more engaged in the school community are more likely to remain in the online program. To that end, administrators should integrate in-class and out-of-class socialization opportunities into online programs.

### Strategies to Integrate Socialization into the Online Learning Experience at Profiled Schools



#### **Deliver Live Instructional Sessions**

- At School A and School B, students participate in two to three live sessions per week. During live sessions, teachers expect students to actively interact with their peers and teacher in real-time via videoconference (e.g., present on a topic, ask questions, share ideas).



#### **Implement School-wide Socialization Opportunities**

- At School A, students participate in live lunches twice a week, via videoconference. Administrators align the lunch periods of online and brick-and-mortar programs, so that online students can socialize with students who study at the physical campus.
- At School A, administrators host whole-school spirit rallies every month, which students are required to attend. Administrators track attendance.
- At School B, administrators recently established a peer mentorship initiative to match new students with returning students.



#### **Establish Extracurricular Activities**

- At School A, School B, and School D, students can choose to participate in various clubs (e.g., student government, Model United Nations, debate) via videoconference.
- Students at School D can also elect to participate in competitions, such as in science, math, and robotics.
- Administrators at School A recently started using tele-presence robots to facilitate online students' participation in club activities held on the brick-and-mortar campus.

## 5) Research Methodology

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### Project Challenges

Leadership at a member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- How do contact schools measure student retention?
- What are course completion rates at contact schools?
- Do contact schools set success benchmarks for their measures of student retention? If so, what are they?
- Have contact schools noticed any disparities in course completion rates across student subgroups?
- What staff do contact schools task with monitoring student retention?
- How do contact schools monitor student engagement in online/distance courses?
- How do contact schools identify students who are at risk of dropping out of online/distance courses?
- What interventions do contact schools use to promote student online/distance course completion?
- Do contact schools design course completion interventions to target specific, at-risk student subgroups? If so, how?
- How do contact schools address “stop-outs” or “dropouts” from online/distance courses?
- How do faculty members contribute to institutional efforts to improve online/distance course completion?

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Research  
Parameters

The Forum interviewed administrators at schools that offer online courses and/or programs for full-time and part-time students. Schools have been recognized as exemplary by education publications and/or by Niche ratings.

A Guide to Online Schools Profiled in this Brief

School	Region	Approximate Enrollment of Part-Time and Full-Time Online Students (Combined)
School A	Mountain West	Below 200
School B	Northeast	Below 200
School C	Northeast	Above 10,000
School D	Pacific West	Below 1,000
School E	Midwest	Below 200



## 6) Appendix

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### Sample Email with Notification of Academic Progress Monitoring at School A<sup>9</sup>

Dear **[Student]** and **[Parent(s)]**,

School A prides itself on providing a challenging education specifically designed for profoundly gifted students. From time-to-time, this may mean that a student struggles to maintain good grades. We also pride ourselves on providing a supportive learning environment that encourages academic risk and growth. One of the ways that we support students is through academic progress monitoring. I have copied and pasted School A's Online Handbook description of academic progress monitoring for your reference.

*Students should maintain a grade average of C or above in each of their courses (English, math, history, science and world languages). If a student's grade average reaches a C- or below in any of their courses during a semester, that student will be required to participate in academic progress monitoring. The exact terms of any given monitoring experience will depend upon the individual circumstances, and these terms will remain at the discretion of the Academy administration.*

*Students participating in academic progress monitoring will be required to meet with their counselor on a schedule determined by the counselor, student, and director. Students may also be required to attend study skills/group sessions.*

*The academic progress monitoring meetings are designed to assist and support students while they work to improve their performance. Once students have maintained a C or above in their courses for four consecutive weeks, they will be released from academic progress monitoring.*

*Academic progress monitoring is not intended as a punitive measure, but as an early warning system for both students and parents. However, in the absence of improvement, more serious consequences, such as not earning credit or being dismissed from the Academy due to poor grades or lack of sufficient credits, may ensue.*

As of today, **[Student]**'s grades in Powerschool are:

- Math, **[percent, letter grade]**
- Science, **[percent, letter grade]**
- English, **[percent, letter grade]**
- History, **[percent, letter grade]**

Based on these grades, I believe that having **[Student]** participating in academic progress monitoring is a necessary and helpful step at this time. We will schedule bi-weekly Zoom meetings with as many instructors as we can (based on their teaching schedule), a parent, and myself. During these 30-minute meetings **[Student]** will

9) Notification of Academic Progress Monitoring, School A, provided December 3, 2019.

provide an update in **[his/her]** progress by course and **[his/her]** plan for the coming weeks. The instructors will add any additional information needed.

As noted in the handbook, academic progress monitoring is not a punitive measure. It is designed to help focus everyone on **[Student]**'s success. We will plan for at least three bi-weekly meetings and adjust as needed.

Please let me know your availability on **[day of the week]** mornings. We will plan on having our first meeting next week.

Warmest Regards,

Director of Online Programs