Action Steps to Implement Recommendations for Reducing Suspension and Expulsion in California Schools

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, with funding from The California Endowment, Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), conducted a review and analysis of California schools' current approaches to and promising practices for reducing suspensions and expulsions. In particular, the review examined the role of students' mental health needs and schools' suspension and expulsion policies and practices. The analysis included a review of the domestic and international literature on suspension and expulsion, an online survey exploring the suspension and expulsion policies and practices of 18 California school districts, and in-depth interviews with multidisciplinary community teams in 3 of the 18 school districts.

Using the findings of the year-long review and analysis, and with input from the project's Advisory Board (comprising leaders in education, mental health, and juvenile justice from across California), EDC developed a set of eight recommendations for policymakers and practitioners:

1. Schools and mental health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement agencies must collaborate to improve outcomes for youth, especially those at risk for suspension or expulsion.

2. Schools and mental health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement agencies must employ improved information-sharing and data collection systems to identify, serve, and communicate about at-risk students.

3. State standards are needed to guide schools' practices related to promoting students' mental health, identifying students who need mental health services, and assisting students to access services.

4. School districts should focus on implementing, adapting, and evaluating evidence-based interventions to decrease suspension and expulsion.

5. School districts must have policies that require programs and services for at-risk youth.

6. School districts must consistently apply suspension and expulsion policies so that existing racial and ethnic disparities are not perpetuated.

7. School districts must identify effective strategies to engage and collaborate with parents.

8. School districts and their community partners should provide support to enable expelled students to rejoin the school community.

Underlying each of the eight recommendations is the understanding that schools must focus more resources on prevention and providing services in early childhood in order to prevent problems from emerging later on.

There are many different approaches to meeting these recommendations. This document translates the recommendations into concrete, user-friendly action steps for practitioners and policymakers, suggesting strategies derived from EDC's experience working with schools and their community partners to promote child and adolescent mental health and academic success and to prevent negative outcomes for youth. These strategies will need to be adapted to respond to the realities of each community, the participating organizations, and the youth and families being served.

ACTION STEPS TO IMPLEMENT THE EIGHT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Schools and mental health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement agencies must collaborate to improve outcomes for youth, especially those at risk for suspension or expulsion.

Close collaboration is essential between schools and mental health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement agencies, both to prevent risk behaviors among school-age youth and to intervene when such behaviors emerge. Assembling a community coalition is frequently one of the first steps in prevention and intervention initiatives that target youth. An alternative strategy is to work with one or more existing coalitions whose mission incorporates issues such as child and adolescent mental health or dropout prevention. Schools and community partners often find they can unite around themes such as "building successful and resilient students in our community."

> *The welfare of students is a shared responsibility. The health of students and their families is the responsibility of the entire community of which the school is a part. . . . By working together, [schools and communities] leverage their resources and identify new resources.*
>
> —Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003, p. 22

Action Steps[1]

Convene representatives from the community's schools and mental health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement agencies.

- Invite one or more decision-makers from each sector to a meeting. Seek out individuals who have a can-do attitude. In the invitation to the meeting, describe the importance of collaborating to better serve the community's youth.

- At the first meeting, have the group do the following:

  > Discuss policy and programmatic concerns related to youth at risk of being suspended or expelled.

  > Select a coordinator for the collaboration.

Following the initial meeting and during the next few meetings, keep the momentum going.

- Create a decision-making structure that provides leadership roles for everyone.

- Work together to create a vision statement for the collaboration that articulates the group's dreams and hopes for what the collaboration will become. Consider the following questions (adapted from Devaney, O'Brien, Resnik, Keister, & Weissberg, 2006):

  > What is our definition of a *successful youth*? What qualities and skills do we want the youth in our community to have?

  > What are our core values as a collaboration, and how will they be represented in our efforts?

  > What kind of culture and climate do we envision for our community's youth 10 years from now?

  > What assets, issues, and needs do we want this collaboration to address?

- Develop a mission statement that describes why the collaboration exists. Consider the following questions to guide the discussion (adapted from Foundation Center, n.d.):

  > Why are we here (or why do we exist)?

  > What are we doing?

  > What is the expected outcome of our work?

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[1]This section was adapted from Education Development Center, Inc. (2011). *Realizing the promise of the whole-school approach to children's mental health: A practical guide for schools.* Retrieved from www.promoteprevent.org/webfm_send/2102

Keep in Mind

Make sure that the collaboration's vision and mission are positively stated, clear, and only a few sentences long.

Identify needs related to youth who are at risk of being suspended or expelled.

- Work together to identify existing policies, programs, and services that target youth who have been or are at risk of being suspended or expelled.

- Identify barriers, gaps in service, policies, and programs needed to better identify and serve youth who have been or are at risk of being suspended or expelled.

- Invite other stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, business leaders, other youth-serving organizations) to provide input to the list of needs.

Based on the identified needs, develop goals, objectives, outcomes, action steps, and a timeline for the work of the collaboration.

- Create a matrix to outline action steps, the responsible parties, and a timeline for completing strategies to achieve each objective.

- When conflicts and turf issues arise, handle them openly by working through the problem together, always keeping the collaboration's mission, vision, and goals in mind.

Keep in Mind

Goals are visionary statements. For each need, develop one sentence about how things would look if the need were met.

Objectives are specific, measurable action statements that describe how a goal will be achieved.

Outcomes describe what will happen or change after the objectives are met.

Recommendation 2: Schools and mental health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement agencies must employ improved information-sharing and data collection systems to identify, serve, and communicate about at-risk students.

Identifying at-risk students as early as possible and connecting them to appropriate services and programs is central to achieving optimal outcomes for youth. A comprehensive and accurate data system can help districts understand the degree to which students are experiencing behavioral and mental health problems and other issues that increase their risk for suspension and expulsion. It is essential that schools and partner agencies share information and data appropriately to better serve children and families.

Action Steps[2]

Working through the collaboration described in Recommendation 1, identify the needs, challenges, and desired outcomes of the data- and information-sharing effort.

- Review each agency's understanding of relevant federal and state laws to come to a shared understanding of information-sharing regulations.

- Determine key decision points at which it would be helpful to share information or data about at-risk students. Consider the following questions:

  > What are each organization's policies and procedures related to sharing information and/or data about students or cases?

  > What information is currently collected in each organization's databases?

  > What are the key decision points at which it would be helpful to share data or information? What would be the purpose of sharing information at each point?

  > How would the information be used?

  > What information would be disclosed by each agency?

  > With which agency or agencies would the information be shared?

  > What are the supports and barriers to transmitting case information electronically or sharing it in hard copy?

  > Would any changes in policy or practice be needed to reduce barriers?

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[2]This section was adapted from the Juvenile Law Center and the Child Welfare League of America (2008). *Models for change—information sharing toolkit: Accelerating progress toward a more rational, fair, effective and developmentally appropriate juvenile justice system.* Retrieved from www.modelsforchange.net/publications/282

- Identify laws and policies that apply at each decision point. It may be helpful to develop a matrix of the relevant laws and policies to clarify when information may or may not be shared.

- Identify desired outcomes for the information-sharing effort.

Develop and implement protocols and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) for the information-sharing effort.

- Review existing databases at each organization to determine if modifications can be made to facilitate information/data sharing.

- Once the parameters of the information-sharing effort have been defined, develop any needed protocols and tools (e.g., authorization to release forms, case management tools).

- Create MOUs to solidify information-sharing agreements among partners.

- Develop processes and procedures for youth and their parents.

  > Ensure that agency staff are aware of their legal responsibilities to youth and their parents/caregivers regarding the collection and sharing of information.

  > Develop policies and protocols to educate youth and their parents/caregivers about the information that is being collected and their rights.

Seek approval from partner agencies and their legal counsels for new tools and changes in policies or practices.

- The collaboration may need to establish a work group to identify strategies for resolving such issues as privacy protection, public safety concerns regarding information-sharing, revisions to relevant policies and procedures, and educating staff, youth, and parents/caregivers about the information-sharing policies.

Recommendation 3: State standards are needed to guide schools' practices related to promoting students' mental health, identifying students who need mental health services, and assisting students to access services.

The development of such state standards must be a highly inclusive process that engages stakeholders at the community, county, and state levels. Implementation of the standards should be supported with tools and resources as well as professional development and technical assistance for school staff.

> *Research clearly demonstrates that children's healthy social and emotional development is an essential underpinning to school readiness, academic success, and overall well-being. Prevention and early intervention efforts have been shown to improve school readiness, health status and academic achievement, and to reduce the need for more costly mental health treatment, grade retention, special education services and welfare dependency.*
>
> —Illinois Children's Mental Health Task Force, 2003, p. 9

Action Steps

Work with local, county, and state stakeholders to create a statewide task force on children's mental health.

• Invite a broad spectrum of individuals from diverse backgrounds and professions to join the task force.

• Where possible, review local and statewide data on risk factors for children's mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders, as well as assessments of what schools and other agencies currently do to address students' mental health needs.

Develop broad recommendations related to making the children's mental health system is more comprehensive, coordinated, and responsive.

• Consider recommendations in the following areas (adapted from the Illinois Children's Mental Health Task Force, 2003):

> Developing infrastructure

> Creating and strengthening promotion, prevention, early intervention, and treatment polices, programs, and services for all children

> Developing a children's mental health system with shared accountability among state agencies and programs

> Investing fiscal resources

> Building a qualified and trained workforce to serve children and families

> Increasing public education and awareness of children's mental health issues

> Investing in research

- Make sure that recommendations related to statewide standards for students' social and emotional learning (SEL) address both incorporating SEL standards into state learning standards and providing technical assistance to schools to implement SEL standards.

- Clearly define each recommendation in terms of who will be served (e.g., all children, children from birth to age 6), what will be accomplished, and by whom.

- Create a final report that summarizes key statistics and presents the task force's vision and recommendations for children's mental health.

Create a statewide plan for implementing the recommendations.

- Establish working groups to identify short- and long-term strategies and action steps for each recommendation.

- Develop a preliminary plan summarizing the recommendations and proposed strategies and action steps.

- Incorporate stakeholder input into the plan:

> Hold public forums across the state to gather comments on the preliminary plan.

> Invite an array of stakeholders, such as youth, parents/caregivers, educators, health and mental health providers, members of faith-based communities, and representatives of youth-serving agencies, to provide input to the plan.

> Revise the plan based on this input.

Have the statewide task force present the final plan to the governor.

- Follow up with the governor within two weeks.

Recommended Resources

Children's Mental Health: An Urgent Priority for Illinois, Illinois Children's Mental Health Task Force (April 2003). Available at http://www.isbe.net/spec-ed/pdfs/cmh_priority.pdf.

Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership [Website]. Available at http://icmhp.org/index.html.

Strategic Plan for Building a Comprehensive Children's Mental Health System in Illinois. Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership (June 2005). Available at http://icmhp.org/aboutus/strategicplan.html.

Recommendation 4: School districts should focus on implementing, adapting, and evaluating evidence-based interventions to decrease suspension and expulsion.

Increased use of evidence-based interventions (EBIs) enhances a community's ability to address the risk factors that threaten children's mental health and contribute to suspension and expulsion. Where appropriate EBIs do not exist, educators, their community partners, and researchers should collaborate to develop, implement, and evaluate new interventions.

> *The prevention of even a small percentage of mental and behavior problems will result in substantial cost savings and improved quality of life for children, families, and communities. Conversely, failure to increase needed access to proven programs will continue to exact a heavy personal toll and a heavy financial burden on workplaces; [on] the educational, welfare, and justice systems; and in State and national economies.*
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> —Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2007, p. 30

Action Steps[3]

Review EBIs for preventing or reducing suspension and expulsion and those that focus on supporting youth who have been suspended or expelled.

- Use existing data (or conduct a needs assessment) to determine which youth risk and protective factors are most closely related to suspension and expulsion in your community.

- Identify EBIs that focus on those risk and protective factors and are appropriate for the target population's age, gender, race, ethnicity, and developmental needs.

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[3]This section was adapted from Education Development Center, Inc. (2011). *Realizing the promise of the whole-school approach to children's mental health: A practical guide for schools*. Retrieved from www.promoteprevent.org/webfm_send/2102

EBIs and Promising Programs to Reduce Suspension and Expulsion

The following EBIs and promising programs were identified in EDC's comprehensive review of the literature on suspension and expulsion. (For more information, see the EDC report *Suspension and Expulsion Policies and Practices and Related Student Mental Health Issues in California Schools.*)

Schoolwide Prevention Models:
- Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
- Restorative Justice

Individual Student-Focused Models:
- Strategies for Success
- Multiple Pathways to Graduation
- Transcendental Meditation to Reduce Behavioral Stress

School and Community Combined Model:
- Systems of Care

Other promising programs and interventions can be found at the following websites:
- SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices: www.nrepp.samhsa.gov
- National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention's "Evidence-Based Intervention Fact Sheets" http://promoteprevent.org/Publications/EBI-factsheets/

Review possible EBIs and narrow the field to two or three.

- Consider the following issues for each EBI:

    > Is there evidence that this program has worked in similar schools and communities?

    > Are any issues raised in the program that would be in conflict with your community's norms and policies? Does the EBI fit your school or community culture?

    > Can you consult with the program developer to determine if minor modifications can be made to make the EBI more responsive to the needs of students, parents/caregivers, school personnel, and community members?

    > What training and ongoing support would be needed for staff?

    > What is the cost of required materials?

    > Can a funding source be identified to pay for training and materials?

> Is external support available to assist during EBI implementation? How much will it cost?

> Does the EBI align with other relevant school and community interventions?

• Involve key stakeholders (including those who will be implementing the EBIs) in selecting two or three EBIs that meet the identified criteria, and present them to the collaboration (see Recommendation 1) for final selection.

Once the final EBI(s) has been selected, identify strategies to support and sustain it.

• Identify professional development needed for school and/or community agency staff to implement the EBI(s).

> Identify who should participate in training on the EBI.

> Determine whether staff will need training in additional areas not included in the EBI training.

• Determine how information about the EBI(s) will be communicated to families and other community stakeholders.

• Explore how existing and new partners can support EBI implementation (e.g., by providing training, funding, or related services).

Implement and evaluate the EBI(s).

• Ensure that the EBI is being implemented with fidelity and having the intended effect.

> Conduct a process evaluation: Was the EBI implemented as planned? Was the target population reached?

> Conduct an outcome evaluation: Did the EBI have the anticipated effect on the target population? What impact did the program have on the system as a whole?

Recommendation 5: School districts must have policies that require programs and services for at-risk youth.

Without policies that mandate services for at-risk youth, many worthy programs are not sustained over time.

Action Steps[4]

Identify the policy(ies) needed to support core programs and services.

- Determine which programs and services are essential to reducing or preventing suspensions and/or expulsions.

- Identify policies that require a school to implement such programs or services.

- Review the district's current policies to determine whether one can be modified to require these programs and services or whether a new policy must be developed.

Draft and mobilize support for the policy.

- Work with the collaboration (see Recommendation 1) to develop the policy and a one-sentence summary of it (e.g., Students in the district's middle and high schools must receive classroom instruction in decision-making and conflict resolution).

- Identify the resources and capacity that will be required to implement the policy (e.g., funding, staff training, materials, space).

- Clarify how implementation of the policy will be monitored and enforced.

- Work with the collaboration and other stakeholders to foster support for the policy among school district leaders.

Implement the policy, monitor the implementation, and make modifications as necessary.

- Once the policy has been approved and implemented, monitor its implementation by addressing questions such as the following:

  > Is the policy being implemented as intended? If not, why not?

  > Does the policy have the desired effect of supporting or requiring programs and services that have been shown to address suspensions and/or expulsions?

  > Have there been any unintended consequences?

- As necessary, collaborate with stakeholders to revise the policy.

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[4]This section was adapted from Friedman, R. M. (June 2001). *A conceptual framework for developing and implementing effective policy in children's mental health.* Retrieved from www.endmentalhealthdisparities.net/documents/Conceptual_Framework.pdf

Recommendation 6: School districts must consistently apply suspension and expulsion policies so that existing racial and ethnic disparities are not perpetuated.

School disciplinary policies must be implemented consistently and equitably. For example, although there is no evidence that African American students act out or are more violent than other students, research shows that they comprise a disproportionate percentage of the students who are suspended or expelled, they receive harsher punishments than white students, and they receive these punishments for less severe offenses.

> *Rates of suspension and expulsion vary widely across schools and school districts . . . and this variation appears to be due as much to characteristics of schools and school personnel (e.g., disciplinary philosophy, quality of school governance) as to the behavior or attitudes of students.*
>
> —American Psychological Association, 2008, p. 854

Action Steps[5]

Review and analyze data related to suspension and expulsion.

- Examine existing relevant data sets, including attendance records, suspensions, expulsions, and disciplinary referrals. Ensure that all data sets capture students' race and ethnicity.

- Analyze the data to answer questions such as the following (adapted from Guardino, 2007):

  > Which behaviors most commonly result in disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions?

  > What are the proportions of enrolled students in the district from each racial and ethnic group?

  > What proportion of absences, disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions are associated with students from each racial and ethnic group?

  > Which staff members are associated with the greatest numbers of office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions?

  > Are disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions more common for student behaviors that occur at specific times or locations?

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[5]This section was adapted from the following sources:
- American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California (March 2010). *Discipline in California schools: Legal requirements and positive school environment.* Retrieved from www.aclunc.org/docs/racial_justice/discipline_in_california.pdf
- Guardino, D. (2007). *Using data for decisions: What you can do to positively impact the disproportionate use of discipline*

Work with stakeholders to develop strategies to promote equitable implementation of disciplinary policies.

• Collaborate with others in the school and community to develop, implement, and monitor strategies to increase the consistent and fair application of disciplinary policies across all racial and ethnic groups.

• Consider the following recommendations (adapted from the ACLU of Northern California, 2010):

> Engage the entire school community—students, parents, teachers, school staff, and administrators—in creating and assessing school disciplinary policies and practices.

> Make sure that staff focus on prevention by proactively teaching students what constitutes acceptable behavior and emphasizing good behavior rather than punishment. Prevention strategies may include using disciplinary code measures, such as peer mediation and conflict resolution, and classroom management techniques to teach and reinforce appropriate behavior.

> Offer professional development to help school staff create a positive school environment, increase their cultural awareness and competency, and implement non-biased discipline. Professional development may include an annual review of disciplinary policies, alternatives to punitive measures, and resources to assist students struggling with behavioral issues, as well as staff training on cultural competency, fostering school connectedness, and teaching conflict resolution to students.

Alternatives to Traditional School Discipline:

• Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
 www.pbis.org.

• Restorative Justice:
 www.SaferSanerSchools.org
 www.RestorativeResources.org
 http://DisciplineThatRestores.org/

• Peer Mediation:
 www.peace-ed.org
 www.communityboards.org
 www.creducation.org

(From the ACLU of Northern California, 2010)

Recommendation 7: School districts must identify effective strategies to engage and collaborate with parents.

As students' primary means of support, parents are essential partners with regard to prevention, school discipline, and mental health and other services for students. Engaging parents serves as a preventive measure to avert disciplinary problems and as a vital source of support during disciplinary actions.

> *[Schools and districts should] embrace a philosophy of partnership and be willing to share power with families. Make sure that parents, school staff, and community members understand that the responsibility for a child's educational development is a collaborative enterprise.*
>
> —Henderson & Mapp (as quoted in Ferguson, Jordan, & Baldwin, 2010, p. 9)

Action Steps[6]

Determine what constitutes meaningful family engagement in your community.

• Convene a meeting of district and school leaders, as well as family and community representatives, to clarify and refine the district's approach to enhancing family engagement.

Strategies to Enhance Family Engagement

• Foster supportive home environments where parents participate in activities that encourage children's academic achievement and emotional development

• Exercise shared decision-making in school matters

• Improve family-school-community communication

• Coordinate resources and services for families

• Provide volunteer opportunities for families at school

• Enable community organizations to use the school's resources and facilities to help meet the needs of students and families

(Adapted from Ferguson et al., 2010)

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[6]This section was adapted from Ferguson et al. (2010). *Working systematically in action: Engaging family and community.* Retrieved from www.sedl.org/ws/ws-fam-comm.pdf

Review existing community practices and best practices related to family engagement.

• Gather information on current systems and practices in the district and community designed to enhance family engagement.

• Use SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence Based Practices and Programs (http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/) to compare parent engagement programs and strategies.

• Consider available funding sources, such as federal, state, and local programs that require family engagement (e.g., Title I, Title II, and Title VII), as well as school-community partnerships, district discretionary funds, and new fundraising efforts.

• Work with stakeholders to select one or more family engagement programs or strategies that the district will embrace.

Create a family engagement plan.

• Make sure that the plan includes goals and objectives, strategies, action steps, and a timeline and lead person for each action step.

Monitor the plan.

• Work with stakeholders to answer the following questions:

> What progress has been made toward achieving the desired outcomes?

> What measurable results (quantitative and qualitative) indicate that the strategies used are benefiting students?

> Is there evidence to indicate that the strategies implemented are strengthening family engagement?

> Is there evidence to indicate that the strategies implemented are resulting in improved support systems for students?

> Are these strategies working well in our community? Should we make any modifications?

Recommendation 8: School districts and their community partners should provide support to enable expelled students to rejoin the school community.

Schools and youth-serving agencies should have case managers who have been trained to work with at-risk youth, including those who have had multiple suspensions or expulsions. Typically, a case manager is best able to identify the supports that a student needs during and after a period of expulsion to make a successful reentry to school. When a student who is involved in the juvenile justice or mental health system is expelled, information should be shared among agencies so the student and his or her family receive needed supports.

Action Steps[7]

Define the goals of reentry and create a reentry process.

- Determine the goals of the reentry process.

- Define the conditions or terms a student must meet before reentry, for example:

  > Enrollment in an alternative school during the expulsion period

  > Attendance requirements

  > Academic performance and behavioral expectations

  > Number of counseling hours to be completed

  > Number of community service hours to be completed

Consider assessing expelled students' mental health, academic, and health issues to identify factors contributing to the expulsion.[8]

Include parents/caregivers in the reentry process.

- Meet with parents/caregivers to review the terms of the student's reentry and to identify the family's strengths and concerns.

- Work with parents/caregivers to create a family plan that identifies goals for the family that align with the goals of the student's reentry plan.

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[7]This section was adapted from a focus group discussion held at the Pajaro Valley Unified School District (CA), 2010.
[8]Recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2003).

- Develop a schedule for when school and community agency staff will connect with the student and the parents/caregivers to review progress toward the goals included in the family's and student's reentry plans.

- Celebrate the completion of each reentry plan.

Determine whether partner agencies have programs or services that align with the goals and terms of the reentry process (e.g., mentoring, tutoring, afterschool programming, mental health services).

Develop a team to support at-risk students and those reentering their home school after expulsion.

- The team should include a mental health services provider, the district's attendance coordinator, a case manager, and other partners as needed (e.g., school resource officer, classroom teacher[s], principal, school psychologist).

- Conduct regular meetings to provide case management for at-risk students and those reentering their home school after expulsion.

  > Use school data (e.g., attendance records, discipline referrals) to identify students at risk of suspension or expulsion.

  > Create support plans for at-risk students and reentry plans for expelled students.

  > Assess the progress of reentering students by reviewing school data and other relevant information.

- Link reentering students to school and community services (e.g., mental health, afterschool, mentoring, tutoring, career training).

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