

## Issue Brief: Student Support Teams

January 2017

### Introduction

In 2014–15, the high school graduation rate reached a record high of 83 percent (U.S. Department of Education 2016). Despite the gains, over half a million students still drop out of high school each year (U.S. Department of Education 2015). High schools have adopted various strategies designed to keep students who are at risk of not graduating in school and on track for earning the credits required to graduate. “At-risk” students are defined as those failing to achieve basic proficiency in key subjects or exhibiting behaviors that can lead to failure and/or dropping out of school. Dropout prevention strategies are diverse; they vary in type of program, services offered, frequency, intensity, and duration of contact with target students.

The U.S. Department of Education (Department) sponsored the **National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate (HSS)**, which aimed to provide descriptive information on the prevalence and characteristics of dropout prevention strategies for at-risk students. The survey collected data in the 2014–15 school year from a nationally representative sample of 2,142 public high schools that focused on 13 specific high school improvement strategies<sup>1</sup> identified by a panel of external experts and senior Department officials. This brief on **student support teams** is the third in a [series of briefs](#) being released this year with key findings about the high school improvement strategies.

### Definition of Student Support Teams

The HSS defined **student support teams (SST)** as a team of high school staff dedicated to identifying and supporting students who exhibit academic or behavioral problems by providing early systematic assistance to students and to connect them to appropriate interventions and supports. This strategy had its origins in efforts to identify and then serve students who had a disability and required special education and related services, but it can have a broader purpose of focusing on students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Student support teams can be used to provide support to specific students who are struggling in school, or they can be implemented as a schoolwide strategy for all students. High schools can offer different supports through SSTs that may include monitoring student progress, developing intervention plans, referring students to intervention services (e.g., reading or math specialist, counseling, intensive case management), and implementing increasing tiers of school-based intervention services. Some student supports<sup>2</sup> identified in the HSS have a more rigorous evidence base, and those are discussed in the next section.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey examined 13 strategies designed to improve high school outcomes for at-risk students. These strategies are: (1) academic support classes, (2) academic tutoring, (3) accelerated academic programs, (4) career-themed curriculum, (5) case manager, (6) competency-based advancement, (7) credit recovery, (8) early warning systems, (9) mentoring, (10) middle to high school transitions, (11) personalized learning plans, (12) social services, and (13) student support teams. See <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/reports-high-school.html> for the series of briefs.

<sup>2</sup> See Exhibit 3 and the Appendix (survey question 81) for the specific supports examined in the survey.

## Research on Student Support Teams

Student support teams can take on different roles and responsibilities for supporting the needs of students at risk of dropping out of high school. While SSTs as a whole have not been studied rigorously as an individual strategy, there is evidence on the efficacy of monitoring student progress and implementing increasing tiers of school-based intervention services. That research is summarized briefly below.

**Monitoring student progress.** Research has identified early indicators of student progress such as attendance, behavior, and course performance — the ABCs — as powerful predictors of high school completion (Bruce et al. 2011). An Institute of Education Sciences practice guide identified moderate evidence associated with the use of ABCs and recommended that educators use ABC data to prevent students from dropping out of high school (Dynarski et al. 2008). This research has informed the type of data that student support teams can use to identify at-risk students, monitor student progress, and provide the necessary supports to keep students on track.

**Increasing tiers of school-based intervention services.** Tailoring interventions to students through tiers of services, sometimes referred to as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or Response to Intervention (RTI), is a framework used in schools to provide research-based academic and behavioral instruction and intervention in increasing frequency and intensity (Kamil et al. 2008). One quasi-experimental study found that PBIS reduced problem behaviors in high schools (Flannery, Fenning, Kato, and McIntosh 2014). Another quasi-experimental study found there were benefits to using the RTI framework as it improved the reading outcomes for struggling high school students (Englert and Mariage 1991).

## Survey Findings on Student Support Teams

This brief describes the prevalence of **student support teams** as a high school dropout prevention strategy. This brief does not measure the effectiveness of the strategy but instead describes the kinds of schools that offer SSTs and the different approaches to SST implementation. This analysis included an examination of four school characteristics: (1) size, (2) poverty, (3) locale, and (4) graduation rate. Only statistically significant differences within a school characteristic (at  $p < .05$ ) are discussed; non-statistically significant differences are not reported. School characteristics were defined in the following ways:

**School size.** School size categories consisted of small schools (fewer than 500 students), medium schools (500–1,199 students), and large schools (1,200 or more students) based on 2013–14 Common Core of Data (CCD) student enrollment data.

**School poverty.** Poverty levels were based on 2013–14 free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) and total CCD school enrollment data. The poverty categories were low-poverty schools (below 35 percent students with FRPL), medium-poverty schools (35–49 percent with FRPL), and high-poverty schools (50 percent or more with FRPL).

**School locale.** School locale included three mutually exclusive locales from the CCD: rural schools, suburban/town schools, and city schools.

**Graduation rate.** School classification by graduation rate consisted of three categories: low graduation rate (67 percent or lower graduation rate), medium graduation rate (68 to 89 percent graduation rate), and high graduation rate (90 percent or higher graduation rate).

**Summary of Key Findings**

- In 2014–15, nearly three quarters of all high schools nationwide (71 percent) had student support teams to assist at least some students. The prevalence of student support teams varied by school locale and size, with city schools more likely than suburban or rural schools to have student support teams and large schools more likely than small schools to have student support teams.
- About one out of every six high school students received direct assistance through a student support team (17 percent).
- Student support teams primarily identified students in need of assistance on the basis of academic performance (92 percent), behavior challenges (85 percent), or attendance issues (82 percent), although staff referrals were also used (74 percent).
- The most commonly reported supports were monitoring student progress (94 percent) and creating tailored intervention plans for students (90 percent). Student support teams often referred students to intervention services such as reading or math specialists or case managers (78 percent) and provided increasing tiers of school-based intervention services (73 percent).

**What was the prevalence of student support teams and what type of schools had such teams?**

In 2014–15, nearly three-quarters of all high schools (71 percent) had SSTs to assist some or all students in a school. The prevalence of student support teams varied by locale and school size (Exhibit 1). There were no statistical differences by school poverty or graduation rates.

**Exhibit 1. Percentage of high schools that offered student support teams by school locale and size, 2014–15**

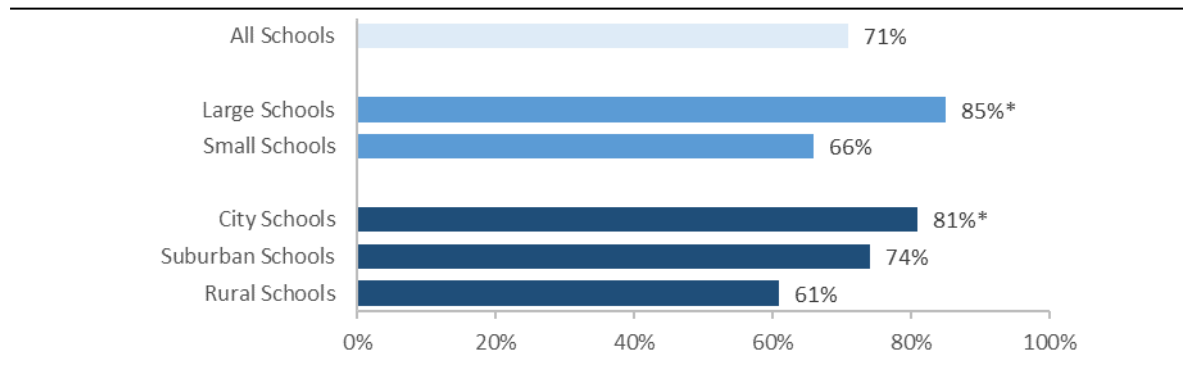


Exhibit reads: In 2014–15, 71 percent of all high schools had student support teams.

\* $p < .05$ .

NOTE: The asterisk is placed on one case per comparison. Differences across school characteristics with two categories were based on comparisons between the two groups. Differences across school characteristics with three categories were based on goodness-of-fit across all three categories.

Unweighted  $n = 1,925$ .

SOURCE: HSS survey of high school administrators, 2015 (Question 75).

**Differences by school size.** Large schools were more likely than small schools (85 percent versus 66 percent) to have SSTs.

**Differences by school locale.** The majority of schools in each locale had SSTs, although city schools (81 percent) were more likely than suburban (74 percent) or rural schools (61 percent) to have SSTs.

### How many students received assistance through student support teams?

In 2014–15, an estimated one out of every six high school students nationwide (17 percent) received assistance from an SST even though three quarters of all students (78 percent) attended a high school that offered SSTs, suggesting that while SSTs are in the majority of schools, extra direct assistance is not offered to all students in those schools.

### How did high schools target students for inclusion in a student support team?

High schools most frequently reported targeting students for inclusion in SSTs based on poor academic performance (92 percent), discipline issues (85 percent), attendance problems (82 percent), or staff referrals (74 percent) (Exhibit 2).

**Exhibit 2. Student subgroups or needs that high schools targeted for inclusion in a student support team, 2014–15**

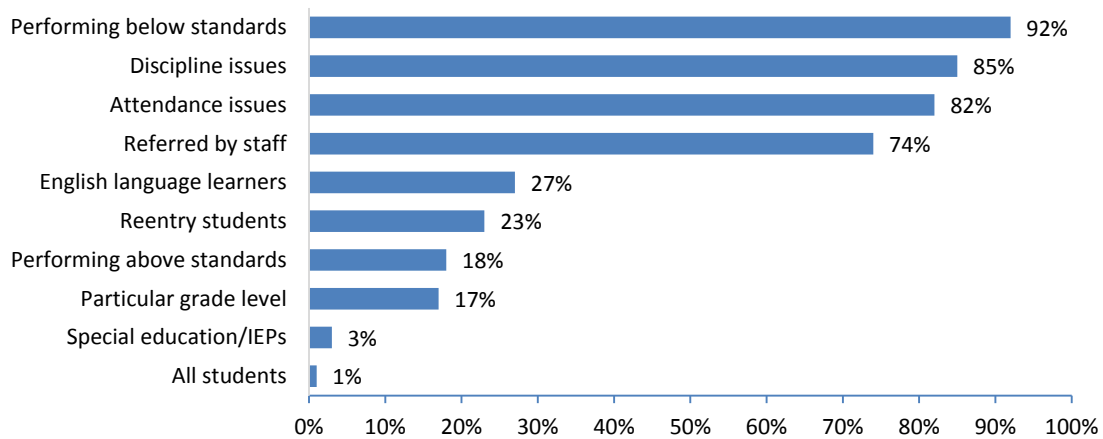


Exhibit reads: In 2014–15, 92 percent of high schools that had student support teams targeted students performing below standards for student support team assistance.

NOTE: Respondents were able to mark “other” and specify categories that were not listed in the survey question. Three percent wrote in special education/IEP. When at least 1 percent provided the same response to the “other” category, the HSS included the response category.

Unweighted  $n = 1,354$ .

SOURCE: HSS survey of high school administrators, 2015 (Question 77).

### What do student support teams do?

High schools implemented their SSTs in several ways. The most commonly reported supports SSTs provided were monitoring student progress (94 percent), followed by creating tailored intervention plans for students (90 percent), referring students to intervention services such as reading or math

specialists or case managers (78 percent), and providing increasing tiers of school-based intervention services (73 percent) (Exhibit 3). The prevalence of these supports varied by school size, locale, and graduation rate; there were no statistical differences by school poverty.

**Exhibit 3. Percentage of high schools reporting the types of supports provided by their student support teams, by school characteristics, 2014–15**

Supports	All schools that offered						Low grad	High grad
	Large	Small	City	Suburban	Rural			
Monitor student progress	94%	95%	94%	94%	95%	94%	94%	95%
Student intervention plans	90%	91%	89%	93%*	91%	86%	95%*	88%
Referrals to intervention services	78%	84%*	74%	77%	79%	78%	73%*	81%
Increasing tiers of school-based intervention services	73%	77%*	70%	75%	75%	68%	71%	73%

Exhibit reads: Among high schools that had a student support team in 2014–15, 94 percent monitored student progress; differences in the proportion of support teams in large and small schools that monitored student progress were not significant (95 percent compared with 94 percent).

\* $p < .05$ .

NOTE: The asterisk is placed on one case per comparison. Differences across school characteristics with two categories were based on comparisons between the two groups. Differences across school characteristics with three categories were based on goodness-of-fit across all three categories.

Unweighted  $n = 1,362$ .

SOURCE: HSS survey of high school administrators, 2015 (Question 81).

**Differences by school size.** Large high schools were more likely than small high schools to refer students to intervention services (84 percent versus 74 percent) and to provide increasing tiers of school-based intervention services (77 percent versus 70 percent).

**Differences by school locale.** The proportion of schools with SSTs that created student intervention plans was highest in city schools (93 percent), followed by suburban schools (91 percent) and rural schools (86 percent).

**Differences by graduation rate.** Low-graduation-rate schools were more likely than high-graduation-rate schools to create student intervention plans (95 percent versus 88 percent) but less likely to refer students to intervention services (73 percent versus 81 percent).

### Which high school staff were members of a student support team?

SSTs most often included school administrators (89 percent), regular classroom teachers (87 percent), school counselors (85 percent), and special education teachers (80 percent). Other staff involved in student support teams were school psychologists (47 percent), intervention specialists (44 percent), and social workers (42 percent).

### How often did student support teams meet?

There was considerable variation in how often SSTs met. The majority of SSTs met weekly (37 percent) or monthly (25 percent). Some reported meeting every other week (18 percent) or less than once a

month (13 percent). Fewer reported meeting daily (4 percent). Meeting frequency varied by school locale and graduation rate (Exhibit 4).

**Exhibit 4. Percentage of high schools reporting the frequency with which student support teams meet, by locale and graduation rate, 2014–15**

Frequency	All schools that offered	City	Suburban	Rural	Low graduation	High graduation
Daily	4%	5%	3%	3%	6%*	2%
Weekly	37%	44%*	40%	26%	46%*	34%
Every other week	18%	17%	17%	20%	17%	18%
Once a month	25%	21%*	23%	31%	20%	26%
Less than once a month	13%	10%	13%	15%	8%*	16%

Exhibit reads: Among high schools that had a student support team in 2014–15, 4 percent reported that teams met daily; differences in the proportion of support teams that met daily in city, suburban, and rural schools were not significant (5 percent, 3 percent, and 3 percent, respectively).

\* $p < .05$ .

NOTE: The asterisk is placed on one case per comparison. Differences across school characteristics with two categories were based on comparisons between the two groups. Differences across school characteristics with three categories were based on goodness-of-fit across all three categories.

Unweighted  $n = 1,355$ .

SOURCE: HSS survey of high school administrators, 2015 (Question 82).

**Differences by school locale.** SSTs in city schools were more likely to meet weekly than SSTs in rural schools (44 percent versus 26 percent). SSTs in rural schools were more likely to meet once a month than SSTs in city schools (31 percent versus 21 percent).

**Differences by graduation rate.** SSTs in low-graduation-rate schools were more likely to meet on a weekly basis compared with SSTs in high-graduation-rate schools (46 percent versus 34 percent). SSTs in low-graduation-rate high schools were also more likely to meet on a daily basis compared with SSTs in high-graduation-rate high schools (6 percent versus 2 percent). A greater percentage of SSTs in high-graduation-rate than low-graduation-rate schools met less than once a month (16 percent versus 8 percent).

#### How common is it to have more than one student support team? How are they organized?

Two-fifths of high schools with SSTs reported having more than one team to provide support to all students identified as needing assistance (40 percent). The number of support teams varied by school size and locale.

**Differences by school size.** Large high schools (52 percent) were more likely than small schools (33 percent) to have more than one SST.

**Differences by school locale.** City schools (47 percent) were more likely to have more than one SST than suburban schools (42 percent) or rural schools (32 percent).

High schools with more than one SST organized the teams to assist students in various ways. The majority (58 percent) reported the organization of SSTs was based on specific student needs, such as

those who are behind academically or exhibit behavioral problems. Almost half (46 percent) of the schools with more than one support team reported organizing teams by the type of intervention provided (academic or behavioral). Schools also organized teams by grade level (37 percent) and across grades (37 percent).

## Methodology

The *National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate* was a survey of 13 high school strategies that are designed to improve graduation rates among students at risk of dropping out and was administered in the 2014–15 school year. The 13 strategies are: (1) academic support classes, (2) academic tutoring, (3) accelerated academic programs, (4) career-themed curriculum, (5) case manager, (6) competency-based advancement, (7) credit recovery, (8) early warning systems, (9) mentoring, (10) middle to high school transitions, (11) personalized learning plans, (12) social services, and (13) student support teams.

The purpose of the survey was to inform education practitioners and policymakers about the prevalence, characteristics, and students served by these strategies in U.S. public high schools. The descriptive study did not measure the effectiveness of particular strategies but instead examined implementation factors in high schools across the country. The study team identified the 13 strategies and designed survey items for each strategy with input from a panel of external experts in the field and senior Department officials.

The researchers selected a nationally representative sample of high schools<sup>3</sup> using a random sampling approach, stratifying high schools based on graduation rate (from [EDFacts](#))<sup>4</sup> and locale code (from [NCES 2013–14 Common Core of Data](#)). The survey collected data from high school principals (or designees knowledgeable about programs and strategies) at sampled schools. The survey response rate was 90 percent. The survey responses, after cleaning and processing, were analyzed in SAS and Stata using descriptive techniques that apply the appropriate statistical population weights to account for stratification by graduation rate and locale.

Results reported in this brief reflect the full survey sample unless otherwise noted and are representative of U.S. public high schools nationwide. References in the text to differences between

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<sup>3</sup> All U.S. public high schools providing instruction to 12th grade students in the fall of 2010 were included in the sampling frame unless (1) the lowest offered grade was 11th grade or higher, (2) there were fewer than five students in grades 9 through 12, (3) the percentage of students enrolled in grades 9 through 12 was under 20 percent of the total school enrollment and the total number of students in grades 9 through 12 was fewer than 20, or (4) the school name contained one of nine keywords indicating juvenile detention center or hospital. Of the 103,813 total schools listed in the 2010–11 CCD, 22,447 high schools met the criteria to be included in the sampling frame.

<sup>4</sup> There were 3,302 schools without graduation rate information in the *EDFacts* public use data set. The researchers used an imputation approach to assign these schools to either the high- or low-graduation-rate stratum. The imputation process began by examining the distribution of the High/Low graduation rate classification for the 19,145 schools by sampling locale. The percentage of schools classified as high graduation rate was calculated separately for each locale sampling stratum; 68.4 percent of rural schools were classified as high graduation rate, 63.0 percent of suburban schools were classified as high graduation rate, and 41.0 percent of city schools were classified as high graduation rate. The research team randomly assigned each of the 3,302 schools with unknown graduation rates to the high graduation rate stratum with probability 68.4 if the school was classified as rural, with probability 63.0 if the school was classified as suburban, and with probability 41.0 if the school was classified as urban. The sample size was adjusted upwards to account for potential misclassification due to this method. In analysis, the researchers used the restricted-use *EDFacts* data and graduation rates published on school and district websites to fill in this missing data.

subgroups based on sample data refer only to differences that are statistically significant using a significance level of 0.05.

## References

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## Appendix: Student Support Teams (Survey Excerpt)

### National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate

This section asks about **Student Support Teams**. For the purposes of this survey, a student support team is team of staff to support students who exhibit behavior or performance problems—an academic and/or behavioral intervention used to provide early, systematic assistance to students who are having difficulty in school (may be offered in a multi-tiered system of supports).

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**75. In the 2014-15 school year, does your school have student support teams?**

(Please select only one)

{Only allow one selection}

**Yes**

**No**

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**77. Are any of the following subsets of students targeted for receiving a student support team?**

(Check all that apply)

Students with attendance issues (e.g., truancy)

Students with discipline or behavioral issues

Students performing below standards or grade level

Students performing above standards or grade level

Students in a particular grade level, regardless of performance

Students recommended by high school staff (e.g., counselor or teacher)

Reentry students

English Language Learners

Other

(Please Specify \_\_\_\_\_)

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**78. Does your school have more than one student support team?**

Please select only one.

{Only allow one selection}

**Yes**

**No**

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**79. How are your student support teams organized?**

(Check all that apply)

By grade level

Across grades

By type of student need (e.g., behavior versus academic problem)

By type of academic or behavioral intervention

Convenience

Other

(Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

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**80. Who is included on student support teams?**

(Check all that apply)

Regular classroom teachers

Special education teachers

Intervention specialists (not a classroom or special education teacher)

Instructional coaches

School counselors

School psychologists

School administrators

Social workers

School nurse

Other

(Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

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**81. What services do the student support teams provide?**

(Check all that apply)

- Implement increasing tiers of school-based intervention services
  - Develop student intervention plans
  - Monitor student progress
  - Referrals to intervention services (e.g., reading or math specialist, counseling, intensive case management)
  - Other   
(Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- 

**82. On average, how often do student support teams meet?**

(Please select only one)

{Only allow one selection}

- Daily
  - Weekly
  - Every other week
  - Once a month
  - Less frequently than once a month
  - I don't know
- 

The full survey is available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/reports-high-school.html>