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## Transcript of NCSET Conference Call Presentation

# Increasing Rates of School Completion: Moving from Policy and Research to Practice

presented by:

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**MS. JOHNSON:** Hi everyone, and welcome. Today we are presenting "Increasing Rates of School Completion: Moving from Policy and Research to Practice." I'm Donna Johnson, Project Coordinator with the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition at the University of Minnesota. Today we're pleased to have Dr. Camilla Lehr and Dr. Sandra Christenson as our presenters. I also want to give a special welcome to any of our Exiting TA community members.

Dr. Lehr is a Research Associate with the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota, and a principal investigator and director of alternative schools research project, a three year federally funded project studying alternative schools across the nation, and the role they play in preventing dropout, providing quality education for students at risk, and serving students with disabilities. Prior to directing the alternative schools research project, Dr. Lehr co-directed Check & Connect, a truancy prevention and student engagement project for children and youth in elementary and middle schools. Her research interests include dropout prevention, engaging children and youth placed at risk in school, and promoting positive school climate. Dr. Lehr is the author of numerous articles on dropout prevention, and an essential tool entitled "Increasing Rates of School Completion: Moving From Policy and Research To Practice."

We're also pleased to have Dr. Sandra Christenson, who is a professor of educational and child psychology at the University of Minnesota. She's also coordinator of the school psychology program here at the University. Her research is focused on interventions that enhance student engagement and learning, identification of contextual factors that facilitate student engagement, and student success in school for students in general and special education settings. She's also working on the identification of the effective family school partnership variables for enhancing student outcomes.

Dr. Christenson is particularly interested in populations that are most alienated from traditional schools and/or at highest risk for school failure and non-completion. She has been the principal investigator on several federally funded projects in the areas of dropout prevention and family school partnerships. She has conducted research on the efficacy of Check & Connect for students with and without disabilities and in urban and suburban schools across grades K-12 for 12 years.

With that, I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Lehr and Dr. Christenson.

**DR. LEHR:** This is Cammy Lehr. Thank you, Donna, for organizing and hosting this teleconference. I'm going to start out by highlighting information about the magnitude of the dropout problem, especially in relation to students with disabilities. And then move on to talk about what we know with regard to key concepts in understanding dropout, who is at increased risk of dropout, understanding why students drop out of school, and what we should focus on in order to keep kids in school. Obviously because of the time limitations, these will be brief summaries, and I'm hoping that you will be able to access some of the resources that I will be talking about to get additional information about these topics.

Lastly I will emphasize some information that was gathered through an integrated review of intervention studies that have shown some evidence of success. I will also describe some of the types of interventions that have been used to address dropout or factors associated with dropout, such as attendance, academic performance, or behavior.

Now before I begin, I want to let you know that much of the information that I will be summarizing is taken from a manual that was developed for policy makers, administrators, and educators, and it's published by the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition here at the University of Minnesota. The

manual is part of a series of what are called Essential Tools, and this one is called *Increasing Rates of School Completion: Moving From Policy and Research to Practice*.

This manual was developed for the distinct purpose of helping to bridge that gap that often exists between the research literature and what is going on in day-to-day lives of children and in our schools. In addition to providing key information about preventing dropouts, the essential tool has abstracts of 11 interventions that have shown some evidence of effectiveness. Now I can tell you how to download the document, and the way that you can do that is by accessing the community of practice on exit at <http://www.tacommunities.org/>. And if you go to the Web site, you can click on Community of Practice on Exiting, click on library, and a draft of the essential tool on school completion will be available to download.

After I provide some of the background information, Dr. Christenson will talk about Check & Connect, which is an example of an intervention model that's been used in a variety of settings, and with a variety of students to promote engagement in school and learning, and ultimately to decrease dropout.

First of all let me mention a few facts that point out the magnitude of the problem. I think these facts tend to drive home the importance of attending to the problem by recognizing the large numbers and percentages of students who are affected. For example, one of the facts that I've come across in the literature suggests approximately one in eight children in the United States never graduate from high school. And based on calculations per school day (this is from the Children's Defense Fund) one high school student drops out every nine seconds. That's an interesting statistic to consider.

We have lots and lots of different ways of calculating dropout and graduation rates. One of the most recent statistics reported through the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research shows the percentage of eighth grade students who graduate five years later ranges from a low of 55 percent in Florida to a high of 87 percent in New Jersey. There are lots of other kinds of statistics that could be reported, that indicate the magnitude of the problem.

Now for students with disabilities, the dropout rate is a special concern. The U.S Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs has reported the dropout rate for students with disabilities for the 1998-99 school year. Overall the dropout rate was reported at 29 percent of students with disabilities dropping out for that year. The highest rate of dropout was for students with emotional behavioral disorders, followed by students with learning disabilities. And the

rate for students with –emotional behavioral disorders was actually 51 percent. So I think these key facts really highlight the enormity of the problem.

Now if we're going to address the problem of dropout effectively, we must first understand the process of dropout. Over the years research has accumulated that can help to frame our thinking and the design of effective interventions. For example, we know that dropping out of school is a process of disengagement that begins early. Dropping out of school is the ultimate outcome, but it's not an instantaneous event, and it's typically preceded by early signs of withdrawal, such as truancy, suspension, or failing grades.

Some retrospective studies have correctly identified students who dropped out by examining information on student attendance, grades, and behavior from the early elementary years. This suggests that we should begin our interventions early, before students reach high school. Now in conjunction with this, we must then invest in the time and effort it takes to monitor the effectiveness of the interventions that are put into place early on, and measure their effectiveness in relation to the students' enrollment status. That is - does the student actually graduate from high school? Unfortunately it's often difficult to get schools, districts, counties, or states to fund longitudinal studies that follow students throughout their school career.

We also know that facilitating school completion is much broader than simply preventing dropout. Now let me give you an example of what I mean by this. One way of preventing dropout is to increase student attendance. We can improve attendance by physically ensuring that we get a student to school. One strategy might be to go and get a student and physically bring them to school when they oversleep or miss the bus. But this does not mean that the student is actually engaged in school on learning. Once the student is actually at school, it is more likely that they will participate in class, complete work, or feel as though they belong. But it is important to recognize that engaging students in school and learning is really the key ingredient in preventing dropout and keeping kids in school. Students who actively participate in school, identify with school, and have a personal investment in learning are much more likely to remain in school and graduate.

All of the dropout prevention programs that have been identified as having some evidence of effectiveness have strategies that are designed to facilitate student engagement, and subsequently school completion. I will talk about some of those examples a little bit later.

Now in order to effectively improve rates of

graduation and school completion, we must target our interventions to those who are most at risk of school failure. The research has been helpful in identifying factors that place students at risk of leaving school early. Some of the factors are considered what are called status variables. These variables are difficult to change, or unlikely to change. Some of the group variables associated with increased likelihood of leaving school early include coming from a poor socioeconomic background, being of Hispanic or Native American descent, living in large urban areas, having high rates of mobility (that is, changing schools frequently), or having a disability.

Now although these variables might contribute to our understanding of groups that are at higher risk of dropout on average, these variables alone do not accurately predict who will drop out of school. There are many students who come from a low SES, or live in large urban areas who do in fact graduate successfully. So, additional variables that might be more useful in screening students who might be at increased risk of dropout are those that are considered alterable. These variables are more amenable to change and can be influenced by students, parents, educators, and community members. Many of these variables are indicators of student engagement or disengagement.

Some of them include student attendance in terms of absences or tardies; academic performance as reflected in grades or homework completion; and behavior as indicated by, for example, number of suspensions or office referrals. Determining student's attitudes towards school and whether they feel as though they belong in the school community are also good indicators of student engagement, and may be useful indicators of whether a student is at risk of leaving school early. Although the research identifies factors for students at increased risk of dropout, the challenge, which is difficult, is to use these indicators in an efficient manner that accurately identifies students who would benefit most from interventions. We'd like to maximize the intervention resources and strategies directed towards facilitating school completion by using them with the students who are most at risk. Unfortunately this is not an exact science at this point.

One way to increase our accuracy is to take individual student information into consideration. An exaggerated example of this could occur during the referral process with students for participation in an intervention. Perhaps one of the criteria would be to obtain a list of students who have a history of being absent more than 15 days in a school year. It would be important to consider each student's history individually

to determine whether the reasons for absence were due to extended illness, or a vacation, or whether they were indeed unexcused. It's helpful to identify students on the basis of more than one indicator. Research suggests that the presence of multiple risk factors increases the risk of dropout.

Other alterable variables that have been associated with increased rates of dropout at graduation provide additional insight with regard to effective intervention. For example school policies such as a heavy reliance on out-of-school suspension have been associated with increased rates of dropout. Another study using a large national sample found that weak adult authority, a climate of truancy and low expectations, large school size, and lack of stimulating curriculum contribute to dropping out. Schools with higher rates of graduation have discipline policies that are perceived as fair, relationships between teachers and students that are perceived as caring, and there is an emphasis on academic pursuits in a safe and orderly environment.

Analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study identified some very specific school level variables that were associated with school completion for students with disabilities. These included offering direct individualized tutoring and support to complete homework assignments, receiving support to attend class and stay focused on school, participation in vocational education classes, and participation in community based work and experience programs. I think some of these examples point to the important role that schools can play in school policies in preventing dropout, and promoting student engagement.

In addition the extent to which there is parent support for learning has been shown to be associated with student success. Parents can provide this support in two ways, they can assist with academic tasks and activities, but they can also provide motivational support to their children. Studies suggest that motivational support for learning can play a significant role in student success, and may be even more important than providing academic support such as helping with homework or various assignments. This research suggests that it's especially important for school staff and communities to communicate the message to parents about the important role that they play in engaging their children in school and learning. Many of the interventions that show some evidence of effectiveness have a parent or family component in place.

Increasing the graduation rates can also be informed by the research that has investigated why students drop out of school. Some of the research that's

been conducted by Larry Korterling and his colleagues has been very helpful in this regard. His research draws on the results of over 600 interviews and 4,000 surveys with high school youth. Some of his work is highlighted in the most recent Impact issue that has just been put out by the Institute on Community Integration, here at the University of Minnesota. His findings suggest that students have to have a reason to want to complete school. They must understand the relevance of graduation in relation to their future. Secondly, students need and want access to an adult who will encourage them to stay in school and help them to succeed. Now this doesn't have to be a parent, and in many cases students who are at risk of not graduating may not have a parent to fill this role. Third, students need to have skills necessary for succeeding in today's schools, including knowledge of how to learn. Schools must provide strategies that promote success in today's measures of performance. Fourth, students who stay in school often have found a way to become engaged in the non-academic side of school, be it a sport, a club, or some kind of extracurricular group. All this information from student voices -- fits very nicely with what we know about the role of engagement and staying in school and persisting to graduation.

It's also helpful to think about why students drop out of school by categorizing the reasons in terms of push and pull effects. For example, some students are pulled towards disengaging from school and dropping out by factors external to the school environment that weaken or distract from the importance of school completion. Students may drop out of school because they are pregnant or parenting, perhaps they must work at a job to help earn money for their family, or perhaps they have friends that have dropped out of school. Other factors influencing student's reasons for dropping out are referred to as push effects. These are situations or experiences within the school environment that aggravate feelings of alienation, failure, and dropout. These might include establishing higher attendance or performance standards that are implemented without providing supports, or a heavy reliance on suspensions, or a school climate that is not safe or does not foster respect between students and teachers or between peers. In order to increase rates of graduation, our goal is to decrease the factors that can influence and push kids out of school, as well as minimize or help students cope with the effects of factors that pull students out of school.

Now let me switch gears for a minute and talk a little bit about the interventions that we've reviewed that show some evidence of effectiveness. Annie Hanson,

Mary Sinclair, Sandra Christenson, and I conducted an integrated review of dropout interventions described in professional journals. We started out with over 300 articles focused on dropout prevention or intervention. And of those we found 45 that were published in professional journals, focused on dropout prevention, and included impact data. We wanted to know what kinds of interventions were being implemented, with whom, and what is being measured to determine effectiveness.

First of all, the bottom line is that the interventions used to prevent dropout varied widely in terms of actual strategies that were used. Also, many of them addressed and measured factors or indicators associated with dropout. Although there are many programs that are being implemented in school across the country, we were struck with the relatively small number we found in the professional research literature that were empirically validated using sound methodology. In our integrative review of the literature, we came up with about 45 programs that had some evidence of effectiveness. And of those, only 25 had statistically significant findings. Furthermore, many of these findings were focused on indicators of engagement rather than enrollment status.

Just to give you an example of what's out there, we organized the interventions into five categories. First, many of them had a personal affective focus. For example, these included retreats designed to enhance self esteem, regularly scheduled classroom based discussions, individual counseling, or classes focused on teaching social skills or interpersonal relations. Academic strategies were the second most common category, and included provision of special academic courses such as bilingual services or individualized instruction and tutoring. Next, we saw some strategies that we categorized as family outreach. These programs utilized strategies such as increased feedback to parents or home visits. We saw strategies that focused on changing the nature of the school's structure; implementing a school within a school, redefining of the role of homeroom teachers, reducing class size, or creating an alternative school. We also saw strategies that were focused on work related issues. And these included providing things like vocational training, as well as implementation of volunteer programs and activities. It is interesting to note that nearly 75 percent of the interventions included several components that fell into two or more of the categories.

I think that my time is nearly up, so in conclusion I would love to have you tap into the Web site to look at the Essential Tool because it has more examples of interventions that have some evidence of effectiveness behind them. There are 11 abstracts that include

descriptions and information about participants, evidence of effectiveness and implementation considerations. I would also like to say that it's important to remember that there is not necessarily one best program, and if a school district or state is going to adopt an established program, it's critically important to consider the existing intervention in relation to the needs, demographics, resources, and other circumstances of the local school or district. Additionally when surveying existing programs, it's important to be sure that any claims of effectiveness are supported by adequate research and/or evaluation.

Now I'm going to finish with that. I have given a broad overview of how we can use the research on dropout to guide the design of effective interventions. Now Sandy will talk about a specific intervention called Check & Connect that actually incorporates many of these guidelines.

**DR. CHRISTENSON:** Thank you, Cammy. Check & Connect is actually one of the few evidence-based interventions that addresses school completion for students with disabilities. We think of Check & Connect as a model, a model designed to promote student engagement at school and with learning. Our approach is based on enhancing the strengths of individuals and connections among home, school, and community specifically through relationship building, problem solving, and persistence.

As you might be able to anticipate, there are two components: Check & Connect. Check refers to systematically assessing students' connection to school, and I'll say a bit more about that in a minute. Connect refers to the timely response or intervention implemented based on students' educational needs. Specifically, students' type and level of risk, - what we think of as signs of early school withdrawal or disengagement - are of interest.

Now let me go back to Check & Connect. For the check component, we have an individual referred to as a monitor who checks those indicators of disengagement that are alterable. The monitoring of students' level of engagement would be done daily to at least weekly. And generally we monitor student performance in three categories. Attendance would be the first thing we monitor. We check absences, tardies, or skips. Another category is the social and behavior area, which includes such things as suspensions, behavioral referrals, or detention. The last category is academic performance and could include checking course failures, credits earned, GPA, or teacher's ratings of academic performance.

When you think of check you should be seeing

an individual who monitors systematically those early, alterable signs of school withdrawal. When you think of connect, you need to think about how our role as interventionists can be to enhance protective factors for students who are showing those early signs of disengagement. All students who get Check & Connect receive at least one level of intervention. We don't believe in only checking, that would be in a sense just admiring the problem. Rather, we want to make a difference and intervene.

All students receive basic intervention. This could include sharing the monitoring data with the student, talking about the importance of school, and perhaps engaging the student in a five-step problem solving strategy where the student could learn to resolve conflict and cope with life challenges that are being presented to the student. The second level of intervention is for those students who are really showing high-risk behavior. These intensive interventions are individualized for the student, really tailored to the student, and fall in varied areas, including academic support (i.e., tutoring), direct teaching of coping strategies, extensive problem-solving strategies, problem solving across home and school, transition support, or involving the student actively in more recreational activities or service learning.

I've referred to the individual who actually implements the Check & Connect components as the monitor. I really need to underscore the role of the monitor. The monitor is integral to the success of Check & Connect. We think of this person as a neutral person who's responsible for helping the student stay connected to school. In fact their primary goal is to keep education and learning 'on the table' or a salient issue, not only for the student, but also for their family members and their teachers. The monitor is a cross between a mentor, a coach, an advocate, and a case manager.

For our one secondary project with students in ninth through twelfth grade, the monitor also helped the student make constructive life choices. The monitor may have helped youth understand the impact of underestimating their life potential, starting a family at a young age, abusing substances, engaging in criminal activities, or coping with parent's mental health challenges.

Let me mention a little bit about Check & Connect, both in terms of its origin as well as its theoretical underpinnings. Then I would like to give you some actual data that we have on Check & Connect. Check & Connect began as a partnership between the University of Minnesota and Minneapolis Public Schools on an OSEP-funded grant in 1990 to develop and field test dropout prevention strategies for middle

school youth with disabilities. That grant actually ran the period of 1990 to '95, and we did several things I think that were really wise at that time.

For one, we developed an advisory committee that was comprised of students that were currently in middle school, students that had gone on to ninth grade, students who potentially were at risk for dropping out, and students who had decided to stay in school even though they appeared to have some of the indicators of dropping out. We also had parents, educators, and community professionals on the committee, trying to draw in the notion of additional researchers to help design this intervention.

The advisory committee was exceedingly helpful. A lot of people had input, and it allowed us to be very responsive to the needs of multiple stakeholders and to a specific context. Equally important though was the theoretical base of Check & Connect. Cammy talked about how dropping out is the outcome of a long process of disengagement and alienation, and that dropping out really is preceded by alterable variables, those less severe types of withdrawal like truancy, suspension, and failing classes that we can do something about. We really learned about this was from Jeremy Finn's (1989) work in terms of his participation-identification model of early school withdrawal. We were very excited about our ability as interventionists to begin to take charge of some of those variables that were within our power to change. Theoretically that was important.

We also were influenced by McPartland's (1994) critical analysis of essential engagement variables. He has summarized a lot of literature, and concluded that highly engaged students are provided with opportunities for success in school work, communication of the relevance of education to their future endeavors, a caring and supportive learning environment, and help with personal problems. Taking his work, we kept thinking in the development of Check & Connect, how can we address this kind of theoretical literature and review that have been done?

Additionally, the research on resilience was significant for us. We knew that many of our kids were resilient, and that we wanted to promote protective factors as well. We were also influenced by the cognitive behavioral intervention literature and systems theory. From these theoretical underpinnings, we designed Check & Connect. After several applications of the model, we can extract core elements that we believe are important for engaging students and fostering their school completion. Let me briefly touch on the seven elements. The core elements are important because they

help us to understand what needs to be in place for addressing the issue of school completion for students with and without disabilities.

The first is relationship building. The monitor really works to build relationships and mutual trust through open communication. This is nurtured through a long-term commitment that's focused on how the monitor can work with that student and others to promote the student's educational success.

The second element is something we refer to as 'persistence plus' that is made up of persistence, continuity, and consistency. The monitor is really a source of academic motivation because they're there persistently; they simply do not give up on kids. They're checking on them regularly, they're trying to connect students with interventions; they're building the relationship through that daily or weekly connection. They also have continuity with the student; they're familiar with the child or adolescent, and the family across school years. We really ideally like to have the monitor work with an adolescent in his or her family for two years, and we do connect during the summer. And then for consistency, the monitor works to pull together many to deliver the message that education is important for the student's future.

A third component is systematic monitoring, and of course that's the routine monitoring of alterable variables. But that leads to individualized and timely intervention, those two levels of intervention described previously. Part of the reason why we have two levels of intervention is that we have to pay attention to the finite resources in our schools. Some of the students who drop out need more Check & Connect time from the monitor than others so we individualize in that regard.

Problem solving is the fifth element; we have used a cognitive behavioral approach to promote skills for the student. We want students to be able to resolve conflict constructively, to use productive coping strategies, and think about solutions rather than blaming others. And it's really important for us to have students be self-determined, so they're not dependent on the monitor. Through the five step problem solving structure, the monitor helps the student begin to think through what's happening to them, about options he/she can try, and about the consequences of personal decisions. We want responsible decision-making.

We try to have students also affiliate with school and learning by having them have access to active participation in school-related activities and events. The last element, and this has been a very, very important element for us, is the notion that the monitor follows

the student and the family. It's truly more of a long-term commitment; we're following highly mobile youth and families to the degree possible from school to school, and program to program.

Let's turn now to the evidence for Check & Connect. We have conducted two experimental studies with secondary level students with disabilities. The first study involved 93 students in grade nine who were identified with learning or behavior disabilities. From this study we learned that students in the treatment group, those who received Check & Connect, were significantly more likely to be enrolled in school, have persisted in school, and on track to graduate within five years (i.e., accruing credits) than students in the control group, those students who had not received Check & Connect during that ninth grade year. Students who persisted in school never interrupted; they didn't miss school for a week, come back, miss school for a week, and come back. They didn't have this interruption pattern; rather they tended to persist in school.

In a second study (one that we have just been writing up, and I'm very excited about our data here), we worked with 150 high school students who were identified with emotional and behavioral disabilities; 71 students received Check & Connect, they were in the treatment group, and 79 were in the control group. We began working with the students in ninth grade, and we worked with them through twelfth grade.

What we found in that study is that students in the treatment group, those who received Check & Connect, were less likely to drop out, more likely to persist in school each year, more likely to be enrolled and on track to complete school in four years than students in the control group. Treatment students were also significantly more likely to have completed high school, graduated at the end of five years, and to have an IEP written during high school. Findings related to transition goals were interesting. Students who received Check & Connect were more likely to have transition goals across the five areas, (e.g., job training, home living), to have their parents attend the meeting, and to have their preferences reflected in the IEP. The latter finding was very important to us because we strive to build a sense of self-determination for students.

I am aware of the time, let me just very quickly say that I believe the lessons we have learned on this project extend way beyond our findings that Check & Connect is working to reduce truancy, or that Check & Connect is working to actively engage students and families at school and with learning. We also have learned many lessons about the importance of sustained intervention.

Students need intervention across school years, and we have some data to support that. We also know the importance of considering the role of contextual factors, whether it's due to mobility, school climate, parental expectations and home support for learning. For example, our high school youth with a very tenuous connection to schooling were highly mobile. Only 10 percent of these students, or 15 students, were in the same school for four years. They were more likely to live in poverty; they were overage, a year older on average; they were more likely to engage in high risk behaviors; and in terms of norm referenced test results, they were rated below the twentieth percentile on academic and social competence by their teachers, and above the -- percentile on problem behaviors.

As we discuss and think about questions, I'm hoping that you will be thinking about the importance of early and sustained intervention, the importance of multiple referral criteria and systematic monitoring of school performance, and the importance of the construct of engagement. If we engage students as learners – help them make a personal investment in learning - we truly can have students leave our high schools with skills, which from my point of view means that they have postsecondary enrollment options available to them.

With respect to the importance of following students and families, we need to begin to think in terms of intra-district and inter-district efforts. And let me be a little bold, maybe even inter-state to help some of our students, and certainly the points related to the role of contextual factors. We have many factors that we can begin to take charge of, making a difference if we facilitate student engagement in our schools.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Thank you very much. We'd like to take questions from the audience now. And if you have a question, I ask that you please state your name and the state from which you are calling before you ask a question. So I'll open it up to the audience. If you have any questions, please go ahead.

**MR. LEVINE:** Yes, I'd like to ask you a question, please. My name is Cy Levine from the Virgin Islands from St. Croix; I'm the State Supervisor for the Department of Education in the area of special education. And I'd like to know, Dr. Lehr gave us a Web site, which I wrote down, and she sent us to check out some area of the Web site. Can you just repeat that Web site again, please, and the area that we should check to get more information on what she discussed?

**DR. LEHR:** Sure, I can. It is <http://www.tacomunities.org/>. Go to the Web site, click on community of practice on exit, and then click on library,

and a draft of the essential tool on school completion is available to download. It is a draft, it's a working draft right now, and it is nearly completed. But the final should be available soon.

**MR. LEVINE:** OK, I appreciate that very much, thank you.

**MS. JOHNSON:** This is Donna Johnson, if I could just add something to what Dr. Lehr was saying. NCSET has been asked to help facilitate a community of practice on exiting, which really looks at increasing school completion and decreasing the dropout rate. I invite you all, if you're interested in this topic, to join our community. What that means is that you would have access to information such as the Essential Tool that Dr. Lehr has developed. Other information such as the national longitudinal transition study, we've got information posted. We also coordinate events such as the one we're having today, and coordinate capacity building institutes which would be all day teleconference -- or all day capacity building institutes looking at the information more in depth. So you can look at the site, be a guest, or you can be a member, and that just means that you register with us.

**MR. LEVINE:** OK, thank you.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Any other questions?

**MR. KNOFF:** This is Howie Knoff, State of Arkansas, State Improvement Grant Director. Sandy, have you had more success with certain disability groups than others with your data?

**DR. CHRISTENSON:** The students with disabilities that have been in our projects have primarily been students with learning disabilities or students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. We have not analyzed our data as a function of disability status. We have not compared the effect of Check & Connect with students identified with LD versus the effect of Check & Connect with students identified with EBD.

Although I do not have the empirical data to address your question, my gut level sense is that it works well with students regardless of disability category. There are core elements that are very sound in the theoretical literature, such as building relationships with students, being persistent in keeping education very salient, and helping disengaging students meet the challenge and the demands of the school setting. They may differ a little bit for a child who's having more of an academic issue from a behavioral issue, but they're both critically important. And we individualize the intervention and tailor it to student needs, family and school considerations, and resources that can be leveraged from the community to meet either an academic or a behavioral need. I think

Check & Connect is an intervention that works with either group. But from an empirical point of view we haven't done an analysis with that.

**MR. KNOFF:** OK, thank you.

**DR. LEHR:** I would like to add something to that as well, because Check & Connect has not only been used with students with disabilities, it's also been used with students without disabilities, ranging in grade level from kindergarten to twelfth grade, and in a variety of settings, including urban and suburban settings. There have been several different applications of the model.

**DR. CHRISTENSON:** In addition, we have implemented the intervention outside of the Minneapolis area. There is an Atlanta school district implementation that has linked to early literacy as well.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Any other questions from the audience for Cammy or Sandy?

**MR. DENNIS:** Sandy, it's Lawrence Dennis from the State of Ohio. I have a quick question, I guess twofold. Of the high school students that you were working with, what impact did your holding the kids to the consequence of graduation exams have to do with -- did it have any impact on these students? And do you have any evidence that shows -- in our state many of these kids are gone before they even get into high school. How do you address that issue?

**DR. CHRISTENSON:** Let me take your second question first. I think you've raised a critically important issue. Part of the construct of engagement is that we really need to engage students as learners much earlier than working with them in ninth grade. As a matter of fact, I'm an advocate, of doing so from day one in our schools. It would be interesting to see what would happen if we could do that with students with or without disabilities that were showing particular signs of early school withdrawal. What would happen to them, or how would they look when they were in ninth grade?

When we worked on the second project (also funded by OSEP), we followed students from ninth through twelfth grades. We went back and did a record review for these students, and we could certainly see many, many signs of disengagement in these students very early on. They had very erratic attendance patterns, for example. They had behavioral concerns and academic failures. I want to underscore that you are absolutely right; - students many times have dropped out. Literature varies a bit, I often read how important the transition periods are between the eighth and ninth grade. However, many times students will leave in the middle school, never even coming to ninth grade, or they'll come to ninth grade for a short period of time, and then they

have very fast 'rebocks' and they're out the door.

In that sample for the ninth through twelfth graders, our students did not have to take the high school exit exam. But this is all going to be changing tremendously across our states as more states are requiring passing the high school exit exam for graduation. High school graduation rates are part of the AYP (academic yearly progress) identification for schools in No Child Left Behind. I don't have an answer to your particular question from our sample data, but I think it's a very important question, and I'm aware that many people will be tracking graduation rates, certainly the effect of high stakes assessment on dropout.

**MR. DENNIS:** Thank you.

**MR. CALDWELL:** Hi, this is Keith Caldwell in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. You mentioned as one of your core elements for intervention the last one mentioned was the monitor follows the youth and family from school to school, program to program. I'm curious what the retention rate has been with these monitors, if that's been a difficulty or not. Because it seems like a lot of turnover we all deal with. And also if there is a change in the monitor, has that directly affected the success of the -- of the young person?

**DR. CHRISTENSON:** You know, I will speak to that, but I'd actually like to have Cammy speak to it in terms of our experience with the elementary and the middle school project monitors, and then let's transition into the high school -- Cammy.

**DR. LEHR:** OK. When we implemented the model at the elementary school level, we had a model where the monitor did in fact follow our students into whatever school they transitioned to, whether it was a mobility issue from elementary to elementary school, or whether it was from elementary to middle school. Although I don't have any specific data to speak from, I can say that the relationship and staying with the student was incredibly helpful in terms of assisting the student with the transition to the school they were going to.

In terms of retention of our monitors, with that particular project our retention of the monitors was very good. We hired monitors that were either graduate research assistants, or were hired as part of a civil service unit. And the majority, I think we had something like nine -- monitors at one time, and a lot of them were part time. I would say the majority of them stayed with us for at least two years, we had some stay with us for four years. So interestingly that wasn't as much of an issue. We do ask for that commitment up front though.

**DR. CHRISTENSON:** Let me piggyback on that. We've always asked for a two-year commitment from

monitors, and because I'm at the University of Minnesota, I'm looking for sources of funding for graduate students. Many times our graduate students have served as monitors, but as Cammy indicated, we've also hired community professionals, and I think those individuals have been excellent in terms of their commitment to the project, and their ability to be a monitor.

Because of the core element, persistence-plus, we try to keep the monitor with the same adolescent and their family for at least two years. If we have to transition in order to be able to use our resources more wisely on the project, so that the monitor is only with the student and family for one year, we make a very careful transition plan with the student and between the monitors, trying to increase communication. I think the retention of the monitors has been excellent. But one of the challenges that we've faced in this, and perhaps it relates a bit to your question, is that the Check & Connect is an expensive intervention. I can't always have this as an intervention that's supported by OSEP or other sources with funds, bringing people into the schools. So one of my challenges that I'm beginning to try to think about is who are the school personnel that can begin to take on a case load of students?

I think that is critically important. We have many people working in our schools, whether they're school psychologists, counselors, social workers, principals, teachers on special assignments, regular and special education teachers and educational assistants. How can we begin to look at other individuals having a smaller caseload, but carrying out these critically important relationship-building types of interventions for students who are showing signs of disengagement? So one of the things I'm discussing with a school district right now is how we might be able to redefine the role of educational assistants. They can work under the supervision of school psychologists and other personnel in the building. But I think that notion of relationship building or students having a person they can connect with, simply because many students have a fair amount of chaos, change, or challenge in their life, is one to which we must attend in our intervention efforts. We're trying to build very much on what we've learned from the resilience literature - that it's a primary caregiver or an interested person in a child's life is helpful. And that does, I think, mean that continuity with one individual.

**MR. CALDWELL:** Absolutely. Great, thank you.

**MS. JOHNSON:** If participants on this call were interested in exploring how to replicate Check & Connect, where could they find more information?

**DR. CHRISTENSON:** Well we do have a Web

site, but I'm going to give you this Web site address only if you promise me that if you look at it immediately you will look at it about six weeks from now, because we do need to update it. Our Web site is <http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect>. Also, we hope to write a training manual for Check & Connect this summer. We have one from the very first project, the middle school project that could be obtained from ICI. However, there is a lot of useful information that could be added to the next manual.

**MS. JOHNSON:** OK, well thank you. I think we're going to end our call for today. Thank you everyone for participating.

END

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