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Peter Tormey, University Contact, (509) 313-6132

Dale Goodwin, University Contact, (509) 313-6133

GONZAGA U. SCHOOL OF EDUCATION RESEARCH AIMS TO CURB RISING HIGH SCHOOL DROP-OUT RATE

Priority Spokane Project Shows Early Identification, High Expectations and Social Support Keys

SPOKANE, Wash. – The Gonzaga University School of Education team that is developing strategies to increase the high school graduation rate in Spokane Public Schools has provided its first update on the research being funded by Priority Spokane via the Inland Northwest Community Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

A broad coalition of leaders representing business, foundations, education and the community gathered Thursday evening at the Bank of Whitman (618 W. Riverside) to hear the Gonzaga research team's project overview, study methodology, emerging themes and strategies, and a description of its next steps. The research team has been working for the past two months on the initial phases of the project. The gathering was hosted by the Inland Northwest Community Foundation.

John Traynor, assistant professor of teacher-education at Gonzaga and the research team's lead investigator, said the initial phase of research has laid the groundwork for the project, and identified evidence-based practices and programs that improve graduation rates. The research team is scheduled to deliver a final report by June 30. Supporting Traynor on the research team are Jonas Cox, associate professor and chair of teacher-education at Gonzaga; and Katie Kaiser, who coordinates Gonzaga's mentoring programs. Gonzaga School of Education Dean Jon Sunderland provides oversight for the project and coordination with Priority Spokane.

PROPOSED PLAN FOR RESEARCH

Middle school reform and high school retention have been studied extensively from a wide array of organizations nationwide. Upon completing the independent research process, Gonzaga's research team discovered a great deal of unity among a number of comprehensive reports published with recommendations and evidence-based practices to decrease the dropout rate. Three consistent themes and strategies emerged from the literature review: Early Identification; High Academic Expectation; and Social Support.

Early Identification: The research literature strongly recommends development of an early warning system that accurately identifies students who are critically off-target to on-time graduation. Recent research indicates issues leading to dropping out in high school can surface as early as elementary school (Balfanz, 2007; Jerald, 2006). These studies emphasize the importance of early identification and intervention, making accurate identification a particularly difficult task. Some of the most credible data cite the importance of targeting intervention starting in sixth grade. Given the time span between these early experiences and the action of dropping out, it is clear that early identification is critical. Historically, the profession has looked for indicators of being at risk of failing to graduate and identified certain racial or

ethnic groups. However, studies have shown that it may be more important to examine differences within these groups than differences between racial or ethnic groups (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2009). Studies clearly indicate that academic success in key areas, rate of absence and misbehavior are tightly linked to propensity to drop-out (Balfanz, Herzog & Mac Iver, 2007), (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989), (Lloyd, 1974), (Morris, Ehren & Lenz, 1991).

According to the data, sixth-graders who develop academic and behavioral problems do not self-correct. Students who eventually fall entirely off track typically display one or more warning flags in the sixth grade: failure in English or math, attendance less than 80 percent or a mark of unsatisfactory behavior on their report card. However, before an early warning system can be implemented, school leadership must understand specific issues facing dropouts. Gonzaga researchers recommend a longitudinal study be done in Spokane to reveal students' patterns to better understand the dropout crisis facing our community schools, accurately predict students most in need of intervention, and help determine specific interventions. Once in place, the system can be used to track and link to appropriate interventions, and provide formative assessments of progress to increase the number of students who graduate on time.

High Academic Expectations: The notion of high academic expectations for all students is prevalent in much of the school-reform research. There is broad agreement that schools and communities should structure opportunities so all students have meaningful academic experiences accompanied by high expectations. Many of the following strategies emerged from the research in this area. Additionally, research in out-of-school interventions also focused on academic-enrichment strategies conducted outside of the regular school schedule and potentially outside of the regular school site.

Emergent strategies the Gonzaga researchers outlined focus on high academic expectations in the following areas: Extended Learning Opportunities (Saturday, summer, after school); Student Engagement; Professional Development; and Academic Enrichment.

Social Support: Most young people struggling academically face other barriers to educational attainment. Students' social, economic, family, and academic needs must be met for them to remain in school. This research cites promising strategies for providing comprehensive support services in the following areas: Mentoring; Family Engagement; Safe and Supportive Environment; Middle-to-High School Transition Programs; and School-Community Collaborations.

NEXT STEPS

The first phase of this three-phase project generated an emerging, theoretical list of leverage points, or strategies, and model/program examples that have a strong record of improving graduation rates. This list, which will evolve and become more robust, will serve as an analytical lens through which the researchers will evaluate the local crisis. The focus will narrow to specific programs and models with the best chances of being successful and being funded. The need for a collaborative perspective has been reinforced as the project has progressed, the researchers noted.

“There is great interest in the Spokane community to address the issue of education attainment,” the report states, noting parallel activities are continuing, including: SPS Board's recent resolution calling for appointment of an advisory committee to develop a comprehensive middle school study; the Chase Youth Commission's Regional Summit on Dropout Prevention; the Children's Investment Fund Initiative; and Youth Indicators work

from the Spokane County Health District.

“These efforts reflect the importance our community is assigning to this issue,” the report notes. “Throughout this process, and even as part of the development of our initial proposal, there has been dialogue with key stakeholders. This will continue as the project moves forward.”

In the coming weeks, Gonzaga researchers will engage with constituent focus groups to further narrow the identified theories, leverage points, and strategies. The local context will be explored and remain in the foreground as an important variable.

“We intend to include key Spokane Public School District personnel, government agency personnel and community partner personnel to participate in these focus groups. This ‘ground truth,’ as it is known in the natural and earth sciences, will provides a clear picture of local activities under way and opportunities for further implementation of the outlined recommendations,” the report states.

After consulting with program officers at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Gonzaga researchers will visit sites in Seattle, Portland and Boise that have engaged in some of these reform strategies to evaluate implementation strategies that could inform the efforts in Spokane.

Also, recommendations emerging from this evidence-based, academic research will soon be linked to both the field experience of education in middle schools and the activities of various community agencies working to provide social, health, and academic support to middle school youth. “We can take bold and effective action to enhance middle school student experiences and dramatically increase graduation rates within our six Spokane public high schools,” the report notes.

With direction from Eastern Washington University and [Inland Northwest Community Foundation](#), Priority Spokane aims to collaborate to improve the economic vitality, education, environment, health and community safety of Spokane County. Atop its priorities is educational attainment, which the group views as the No. 1 priority over economic attainment by more than a 2-to-1 margin.

Priority Spokane is focused on effective interventions targeting middle school students to dramatically increase graduation rates within the six high schools of Spokane Public Schools. Partnering with stakeholders, the research team will use the identified strategies to create specific recommendations for evidence-based models and programs that have potential to improve Spokane’s high school graduation rate.

Dropping out of school unfortunately begins a lifelong chain of despair, predisposing individuals to a much higher likelihood of unemployment, poverty, divorce, poor health, reliance on public assistance, incarceration and even death row (Bridgeland, 2006). The U.S. Department of Commerce (2008) reports the average annual salary for high school dropouts is \$24,000 compared to \$40,000 for high school graduates. The negative impact on society of having large numbers of citizens not graduate from high school is clear. When youth from particular communities drop out at disproportionately higher numbers, there is an even greater impact on the economic and social health of a community.

For more information, contact [Jon Sunderland](#), dean of the Gonzaga School of Education, at (509) 313-3594 or via e-mail. The [full preliminary report](#) is online at <http://bit.ly/cNhDZW>.