



Academic Interventions to Help Students Meet Rigorous Standards: State Policy Options

Executive Summary

Background and Context

Calls to raise rigor and graduation rates in our nation's high schools are increasing, coming from both national organizations and policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels. As policymakers and practitioners at all levels work to implement these reforms, they are becoming aware of an acute and immediate need to help students already struggling under existing standards to meet new, more rigorous requirements. In the August 2006 issue brief, *Increasing Academic Rigor in High Schools: Stakeholder Perspectives*, and the accompanying tool, *Defining Rigor in High School: Framework and Assessment Tool*, the National High School Alliance identified key elements of reform efforts to increase rigor in high school and provided a conceptual framework to help policymakers and practitioners develop a common language to discuss rigor. This report addresses the needs of students struggling to reach these higher standards through the lens of state policy.

The purpose of this report is to inform the design of state policies and programs to help at-risk students succeed as they face challenging, college preparatory curricula and increased graduation requirements. It is also intended as a tool for initiating dialogue among leaders about effective policies and programs.

While a more challenging curriculum may increase the engagement of at-risk students, there is no doubt that their success will require significant academic supports. This report makes the "case" for a state role in providing supports for struggling students and provides information to take action: a review of current literature on academic interventions from national research and policy organizations; brief descriptions of these interventions; examples of state-level implementation; and options for state policymakers based on this information. The final section is designed to help state policymakers develop a comprehensive policy agenda by organizing the recommended state policy options around three thematic categories: data systems; structural changes; and curriculum and instruction.

The State Role in Providing Academic Interventions

It is critical that state policies to increase rigor include targeted strategies to support struggling students, particularly in the most high-need schools and districts. Although the primary responsibility for providing academic interventions currently lies at the district and school level, there are steps that states can take to increase their role and develop a more comprehensive system for improvement. States can develop early warning and identification systems, fund the development, evaluation, and expansion of interventions, and provide resources and technical assistance to help schools and districts implement intervention programs.

Academic Intervention Programs

Based on a review of current literature from national research and policy organizations, the National High School Alliance identified five categories of academic interventions that characterize the vast array of programs and policies directed toward struggling students.

- I. Accelerated Learning Options
- II. Extended Learning Time Programs
- III. Personalized Learning Environments
- IV. Dropout Prevention and Recovery Programs
- V. Incorporate Literacy Instruction into the Curriculum

Developing a Comprehensive Plan for Change

In this report, the National High School Alliance recommends a range of state policy options based on an analysis of research and the literature of national policy and research organizations. The interventions that these policies support, however, cannot be effective unless they are part of a broader agenda to transform the entire school culture as it relates to learning, teaching, supports, expectations, and relationships among students and adults. The strategies targeted toward struggling and at-risk students must also be part of a larger comprehensive plan with the objective of ensuring that *all* students are ready for post-secondary education, careers, and active civic participation. States can support a comprehensive approach to designing interventions that meet the needs of all students through legislation that provides funding and requires explicit attention to the needs of at-risk students. This section of the report also provides descriptions of two states—Indiana and Virginia—where interventions for at-risk students are being provided in the context of a state-wide high school reform agenda.

Summary of State Policy Options

This summary section provides an “at-a-glance” review of the state policy options recommended throughout the report. To help policymakers approach these options as potential “policy levers,” they are grouped into three major thematic categories: data systems; structural changes; and, curriculum and instruction.

For more information, or to obtain copies of this report, contact hsalliance@iel.org or visit www.hsalliance.org.