Oregon Students at Risk of Disengaging

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Bill T. Hansell, M.S.
Youth Development Policy Analyst
Youth Development Council
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Student Disengagement
Dropping out of high school and failing to graduate within four years is a process (Hazel, Pfaff, & Gallagher, 2014; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). The process is typically gradual and has come to be referred to as disengagement (Henry et al., 2012). Oregon’s four-year high school graduation rate has been among the lowest in the nation for the past several years (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Last year, Oregon’s dropout rate and the total number of dropouts were at ten-year highs. A growing body of research indicates that On-track Indicators, also known as Early Warning Indicators, are a promising approach to increasing student engagement in high school and increasing graduation rates (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Freeman et al., 2015; Hazel et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2012; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013; Neild et al., 2008; Roderick et al., 2014). Research has established that on-track students are nearly four times more likely to remain engaged in school and graduate within four years than their off-track peers, and that on-track status was a more accurate predictor of graduation than a student’s race/ethnicity, economic status, or prior achievement (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

Oregon’s Freshman On-track Measure
In 2012, the Oregon Education Investment Board (OEIB) adopted the Freshman On-Track (FOT) metric based on the above-mentioned research findings in an effort to help schools and districts keep students engaged and stem the tide of dropouts and low graduation rates. The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) has been reporting the FOT metric in school and district annual report cards ever since. According to the current definition, in order to be considered on-track, a first year student must meet full academic year status (denominator) and have earned 25% of the credits required to graduate (a minimum of 6 credits) prior to the start of 10th grade (numerator). Throughout the remainder of this paper, first year students included in the denominator but not in the numerator of the FOT metric are considered off-track. The off-track rate is calculated by subtracting the FOT numerator from the FOT denominator. As mentioned above, this number represents the estimate of off-track students and is the numerator of the off-track rate. The denominator for the off-track rate is the same used in the on-track calculation, as
it represents all eligible first year students. The off-track rate is not an official ODE calculation, but the counts used in the calculation are from official ODE estimates.

Demographics
Last school year in Oregon, 8,484 first year students were not on track to graduate within four years prior to the start of their second year. The statewide off-track rate was 20.1%. First year off-track students, from official ODE counts and categories, were 83.0% Combined Disadvantaged (explained below), 72.5% Economically Disadvantaged, 60.2% male, 39.8% female, and 36.2% under-served races/ethnicities.

Racial and Ethnic Disparities
The rates of off-track students clearly illustrate the racial and ethnic disparities present in Oregon’s education system. Every under-served race and ethnicity has off-track rates above the statewide average of 20.1%. Some are nearly twice as high. The off-track rate for American Indian/Alaska Native students is 36.5%. The rate is 29.8% for African American first year students, 26.2% for Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, and 27.4% for Hispanic/Latino students. Conversely, students who are Multi-Racial, White, and Asian have off-track rates below the state average at 18.3%, 18.0%, and 5.9% respectively.

Examining economic disadvantage within race/ethnicity of off-track students paints a bleak picture. The numbers are staggering. Economic disadvantage ranges from a low of 59.4% among Asian off-track students to a high of 88% among Hispanic/Latino off-track students. Off-track students who are African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic/Latino are all over 80% economically disadvantaged.

Key Findings
The single most important finding based on our analysis of the 2014-2015 Freshmen On Track (FOT) metric, was that students who are at risk of disengaging from Oregon high schools are primarily from vulnerable and marginalized populations of society. An astounding 83% of
those at risk of disengaging are students in the Combined Disadvantage category. The category refers to combining all student groups that are considered to be disadvantaged. Specifically, ODE defines the Combined Disadvantage category as students who are in any of the following groups: Economically Disadvantaged, English learners, Students with Disabilities, Black (not of Hispanic origin), Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. In other words, over four-fifths of the students who were at risk of disengaging from high school last year are either from an under-served race/ethnicity, are economically disadvantaged, are students with a disability, do not speak English as their primary language, or a combination of any or all of them. The stark reality is that the overwhelming majority of the students who are at risk of disengaging from Oregon high schools represent vulnerable and marginalized populations of society.

Another critical finding is that Oregon’s Freshman On-Track (FOT) Indicator does not utilize multiple measures. It is a single measure of the percentage of credits earned prior to the beginning of 10th grade. The relevance is that every other early warning indicator and on-track indicator reviewed in the research literature was comprised of multiple measures (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Freeman et al., 2015; Hazel et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2012; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013; Neild et al., 2008; Roderick et al., 2014). The most common measures for on-track indicators have been referred to as the ABC’s of keeping on track and stand for attendance, behavior, and course grades (Mac Iver & Messel, 2013). The concern is that Oregon’s FOT measure is not supported by prior research and is less rigorous than evidence-based on-track and early warning indicators. Even more alarming is that extant research indicates that Oregon’s single measure on-track indicator is likely not as strong a predictor of school engagement and on-time graduation as it could be if it was comprised of multiple measures. To be clear, if Oregon’s FOT Indicator utilized multiple measures, the already high numbers of off-track students would likely increase. However, it should be noted that increasing the predictive power of the FOT Indicator is beneficial because it means that it would better capture those students truly at risk of disengaging and would better allow for delivery of timely interventions that meet the unique needs of these students.
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Research indicates that on-track students are nearly four times more likely to remain engaged in school and graduate within four years than their off-track peers, and that improvements made in 9th grade on-track rates are sustained through 10th and 11th grades, culminating in dramatic increases in four-year graduation rates (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Roderick et al., 2014). Increases in graduation rates occurred in as few as four years after implementation, and increases ranged from 8 to 20 percentage points with an average of 13 percentage points across all schools with a diverse range of students served (Roderick et al., 2014).

Likewise, preliminary analysis by ODE indicates that a student who was not on track at the end of their first year dropped out during their second year at a rate 16 times higher than their on-track peers. If regular attendance is added to create a multiple measure, the odds of dropping out are 36 times higher. Adding an additional measure more than doubled the predictive value of the current FOT metric (Oregon Department of Education, 2016).

A most promising finding is how equitable the outcomes have been for interventions targeting student engagement by increasing on-track rates. Studies have consistently shown that student populations with the lowest on-track rates showed the greatest improvement and student populations with the highest on-track rates showed the least improvement, but all improved (Henry et al., 2012; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013; Neild et al., 2008; Roderick et al., 2014).

Statement of Need
The need is immediate and dire. Last school year in Oregon, 8,484 first year students were found to be at risk of disengaging from school and those students represent a single cohort. That number of students is unacceptable for all grades, Pre-kindergarten through 12th grade combined, let alone a single cohort. The most recent data available from the American Community Survey (ACS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2014 estimated that among 18 through 24 year-olds living in Oregon, between 42,506 and 56,458 had not earned a high school diploma or a recognized equivalency. There are simply too many young adults who have disengaged from school.
Lost Human Capital

Disengaging from school is a process that culminates in dropping out of school. Dropping out of school significantly increases the chance of problem drug and alcohol use, and the commission of violent crime in early adulthood (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). Disparities among dropouts along racial and ethnic lines have been found to be negatively related to health and prosperity measures across the life course (Woolf, 2007). Dropping out of high school significantly increases the likelihood of criminal activity and incarceration for all males, but the effect is greater for young men of color (Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Moretti, 2005). Western and Wildeman (2009) found a nearly 70 percent chance that an African American male without a high school diploma will be incarcerated by his mid-30s. Even when controlling for economic status, age, and race, dropping out of high school was found to be positively related to arrest through age 25 (Thornberry, Moore, & Christenson, 1985). Pregnancy is the number one reason given for dropping out by female students (Shuger, 2012). Nationally, 34% of students who become pregnant drop out and the rate is even higher for African American and Hispanic/Latina students (Perper, Peterson, & Manlove, 2010). Research indicates that dropouts have dramatically lower earnings over their lifetimes and substantially poorer health-related outcomes (Muennig, 2005; Rouse, 2005).

The opportunity is now. Last year 8,484 first year students were found to be at risk of disengaging from school. Last year alone these 8,484 students in a single cohort increased their risk for a range of negative outcomes, from dropping out to incarceration, from lower wages to poor health, and disproportionately so. The need is immediate and more importantly, disengagement is preventable.

Youth Development Council’s Mandate

The Oregon Legislature has charged the Youth Development Council (YDC) with overseeing a unified, seamless system that provides services to school-age children through youth 24 years of age in a manner that supports positive youth development towards educational and career success. Specifically, the YDC advocates for the provision of services to Opportunity Youth ages 16-24 who are disengaged from the educational system and the workforce, and for Priority
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Youth ages 6-15 who are at risk of disengaging and on the path to becoming Opportunity Youth. Students who are at risk of disengaging are, by definition, at the very core of YDC’s legislative mandate and positive youth development advocacy. Disengaged students are typically served by several state systems including juvenile justice, public health, and corrections, all of which can be the starting point for re-engagement efforts. Ideally, other systems and community-based organizations can help mitigate the risk disengaged students face and facilitate a full re-engagement with educational opportunity. The Youth Development Council is uniquely positioned, and indeed mandated, to oversee the seamless delivery of a coordinated statewide effort to re-engage Oregon’s disengaged students and those at risk of disengaging successfully with education.

**Return on Investment**

National estimates show that for each student who is re-engaged with school and averted from dropping out of school or becoming disengaged from work, society experiences an immediate tax savings of $13,900 per year, and an immediate social cost benefit of $37,450 per year in 2011 dollars (Belfield et al., 2012). Based on this estimate, if the 8,484 students who were at risk of disengaging from high school last year actually drop out and remain unemployed, the resulting immediate yearly tax and social burden will total $435,653,400. If even 50% of those students returned to on-track status, graduated, and became employed, it would represent a yearly savings of over $217 million.

In addition to the quantifiable savings associated with student re-engagement, the return on investment for human capital is beyond financial measure. Investing in the positive development of vulnerable and marginalized youth is an investment in families, schools, communities, businesses, the state itself, and ultimately in future generations of Oregonians. The investment in preventing disengagement sends a strong and clear message that all of Oregon’s youth have inherent value. The mandate is clear: creating more opportunity to keep students engaged and on track is both a financial and ethical responsibility.
Actionable Policy Recommendations

It is critical that efforts to keep students on track realize the importance of bringing every available resource to bear on this endeavor, including the indispensable support of community partnerships. The Youth Development Council funds community-based organizations through its Youth & Community Grants. These resources provide educational and social-emotional learning to complement and support school-based efforts to keep students engaged in school. The legislature should approve an increase to the full implementation of Youth & Community Grant funding so the Youth Development Council can fund all qualified and effective programs across the state.

Additionally, building the capacity of community-based organizations to collect and share data on program quality and effectiveness must be addressed. It is often the case that schools are unaware of the full spectrum of services that can be provided to students during out-of-school time by community-based organizations and, conversely, community-based organizations are often unaware of the specific educational needs of the students they serve. The legislature should increase funding to the Youth Development Council to build such capacity and ameliorate barriers that exist in fully realizing school and community partnerships.

Successfully keeping students engaged in school will require cross-systems’ collaboration between community-based organizations, higher education, employment, and public health, to name a few. Therefore it is critical that the Youth Development Council’s legislative mandate to oversee a statewide unified system providing supports to Priority Youth and Opportunity Youth, ages 6-24, be fully realized. To ensure the seamless delivery of equitable statewide engagement services, the Youth Development Council must coordinate these efforts.
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References


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