

California Teachers Association Institute for Teaching

Reducing High School Dropouts through the Positive Deviance Approach

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1. The problem this planning proposal will address.

According to the California Dropout Research Project, one of the most important indicators of school performance is the high school graduation rate. Graduation rate is often included in both the federal and state accountability systems as an important way to judge the performance of schools alongside the more common indicator based on student test scores. The Los Angeles Times in an Opinion Editorial (July 17, 2007) stated that *California's children are abandoning school at the rate of about 150,000 a year — a number equivalent to the population of Torrance, or Irvine, or all of Imperial County. Fewer than 70% of ninth-graders statewide will graduate from high school, and in some districts the percentage drops to less than half. Shockingly, this is not particularly a problem for schools, which are ranked primarily on their test scores. If marginal students leave, it only helps their averages.*

Media and educational policy reports about alarming African American and Latino student dropout rates and the failure of schools to prepare students for the workforce clearly reveal that it is not just students, but our social and economic systems that are *at-risk*. Attempts to reform or *fix* the high school dropout problem have not been lacking. Over the last 15 years, millions of government and foundation dollars have supported hundreds of school reform movements in curriculum, instruction, professional development, and school organizational structure (i.e. smaller learning communities). All of these reform models have focused on a common problem solving process: needs analysis of what is wrong or lacking in schools, followed by research into best practice to address these problems, and then design and implementation of plans to reduce student dropouts. This process has achieved moderate or temporary results in some low performing schools, but according to a recent Rand Corporation study, the overall results and improvements in California schools are insignificant.

2. The goal of this planning proposal is to answer the following questions.

Why do certain African American and Latino students with access to the same resources remain in high school while others dropout? Are there certain student, teacher, administrator, parent and other stakeholder group practices/behaviors within and outside of the school and classroom that enable African American and Latino students to remain in high school? Can the strength-based behavior/social change approach, *Positive Deviance*, identify specific and common practices/behaviors that significantly increase African American and Latino student high school retention and therefore, reduce the number of high school student dropouts? To effectively address the high school dropout problem in California, this planning proposal will use a strength-based design, *Positive Deviance*, to identify specific and common practices/behaviors to significantly increase African American and Latino student retention and therefore, reduce the number of high school student dropouts. Positive Deviance is an approach that is based on two important assumptions: (1) that solutions to community problems already exist within the community of interest and (2) that it is possible to find successful solutions to problems *right now* before all the underlying causes are addressed. The Positive Deviance approach de-emphasizes school change strategies based on expert models and external applications. Through the Positive Deviance

methodology each stakeholder group (teachers, administrators, students, and parents) is empowered to discover their own solutions, based on their own resources. This planning proposal expects to discover a successful, replicable design that high school communities can utilize to identify practices/behaviors to significantly reduce African American and Latino student dropouts.

3. Planning Proposal Design.

The Positive Deviance approach is designed to uncover school community practices and behavioral norms related to the high school dropout problem for African American and Latino students and practices and behavioral norms which encourage African American and Latino students to remain in high school and graduate. In other words, the Positive Deviancy approach is a tool to discover why certain African American and Latino students with access to the same resources remain in high school while others dropout. This planning proposal is divided into 5 overlapping phases. Each phase is designed to reduce the high school dropout rate for African American and Latino students.

Phase One: Positive Deviance Statewide Planning Team. Because the ultimate goal of this planning proposal is to develop a statewide proposal to reduce African American and Latino student dropouts, key school community stakeholders from around California will be identified to participate on the Positive Deviance Planning Team. Members of this planning team will include: CTA IFT Board members and staff, CTA local and state representatives, classroom teachers, school administrators, high school students, and high school student parents. Participants will be ethnically, gender, and geographically diverse. Members of the planning team will be trained in the Positive Deviance approach. The statewide planning team will be trained by Jerry Sternin, Director of the Positive Deviance Initiative, Friedman School of Nutrition Science & Policy, Tufts University. The planning team will select up to three high schools to act as prototypes for this planning proposal. The planning team, in collaboration with the pilot high school(s) will also be responsible for determining how high school dropouts are defined and measured. The California Department of Education computes two different graduation rates, based on two different formulas. The first rate is based on the number of ninth-graders enrolled four years prior to graduation. The second rate—based on a formula approved by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)—estimates ninth-grade enrollment from dropout figures. The second rate is the one California uses for state and federal accountability, but the first rate is more similar to other estimates, and is considered more accurate. Throughout the planning process, the planning team will meet to review and reflect on the progress being made with Jerry Sternin and/or other CTA IFT representatives.

A first step in the establishment of the CTA IFT Positive Deviance Statewide Planning Team will be to hold a general information meeting to explain and answer questions on the planning proposal and the Positive Deviance approach. A general invitation will be extended to all school community stakeholders, including classroom teachers, parents, students, administrators, school board members, policy advocates, California Department of Education Staff, CTA leaders, staff, and management. As part of the general invitation notice, invitees will be informed that following this general information session there will be an organizing meeting for the purpose of forming the CTA IFT Positive Deviance Statewide Planning Team. Both the general information meeting and the Positive Deviance Statewide Planning Team meeting will be held in Burlingame, California.

The first action to be taken by the CTA IFT Positive Deviance Statewide Planning Team will be to meet and learn from the experiences and expertise of key individuals from around the state who are directly involved with high school student dropouts/retention. This will be a working session, where we will define important parameters, objectives and expectation for the Planning Grant.

Phase Two: Meeting with the High School Community Prototype. California's lowest performing high poverty high schools will be invited to participate in this planning proposal. Interested high school teams, including teachers, school and district administrators, parents, and CTA local leaders and staff will participate in a general information meeting on the planning proposal, including participant requirements, and the Positive Deviance approach. At the conclusion of this meeting, interested high school teams will be given proposal application forms.

Schools must apply to participate and must show evidence of at least 70% support from their faculties, have the approval and support of their school districts, and the endorsement of their CTA Chapter. Evidence of support will be through an application process and assessed through direct interviews. High school teams will have 30 calendar days to complete and return their proposal application form to the CTA IFT.

A general information meeting will be held with the teachers, administrators and staff from each of the selected participating high schools. The purpose of this meeting is to explain and answer questions on the planning proposal and the Positive Deviance approach.

Similar meetings will be held with students and parents. From each of these meetings representatives will volunteer to be part of the High School Planning Proposal Collaborative. The Collaborative will receive Positive Deviance and facilitation skills training. Two individuals from each of the stakeholder groups will be selected as the key facilitators for their respective groups. Mr. Sternin will play a key role in this training. The High School Planning Proposal Collaborative will work closely with the Positive Deviance Statewide Planning Team.

Phase Three: Defining the Problem, Desired Outcomes and Identifying Positive Deviants.

Separate and/or joint stakeholder trainings/meetings will be held to focus on the problem of high school dropouts. The PD training for each of the stakeholder groups will be specific to their needs. Stakeholder meetings will be organized and directed by the key facilitators. The first two 4 D's of Positive Deviance methodology (Define, Determine, Discover, Design) will guide each stakeholder meeting.

- **Define:** Each meeting will begin by addressing the high school dropout problem in measurable terms based on the parameters set by the Positive Deviance Statewide Planning Team and Pilot high school stakeholders. A clear and concrete definition will be discussed and agreed to by stakeholders. *The what, who, and when that describe the dropout problem will be clearly delineated.* Once all stakeholders have reached a common understanding of the dropout problem, stakeholders will discuss what a successful desired outcome would look like. For example, if drop out rates are currently 40%, the desired outcome for the program might be to reduce attrition to 20%/ (It is important to note that the "desired outcome" is not "aspirational" but is based on what is demonstrably possible today as evidenced by drop out rates at a high school with similar demographics).

- **Determine:** Based on a clear and concrete understanding of the dropout problem and the desired outcome, stakeholders determine if there are Positive Deviant students in their high school who exhibit the desired outcome right now.

Phase Four: Positive Deviance Inquiry. After the high school dropout problem is defined, issues impacting retention are identified, and related current practices/behaviors are discussed. Each stakeholder group describes barriers and constraints that emerge from identifying common practices/behaviors that lead to students dropping out of high school.

Participating stakeholder groups will be trained to observe and interview identified Positive Deviants within their respective stakeholder group noting the special practices that enable them to overcome the common barriers and result in high school retention. Students will focus on students while parent stakeholders will focus their attention on the parents of Positive Deviant students.

- **Discover:** Stakeholders focus their attention on observing and interviewing Positive Deviants to discover unique practices/behaviors enabling the Positive Deviant students to stay in high school more than other students in their high school. Each stakeholder group uncovers successful uncommon behaviors/strategies practiced by the students that remain in high school. However, only those Positive Deviant practices/behaviors accessible to all are considered. Each stakeholder group focuses on practices and not attitudes or values. Each stakeholder group discovers successful, replicable Positive Deviant behaviors to stay in high school. In other words, increasing high school retention requires a system-wide identification of each stakeholder group identifying the Positive Deviant practices/behaviors within their own respective stakeholder group.
- **Design:** Once all observations and interviews are completed, stakeholders will reconvene. Stakeholders will discuss the factors enabling each stakeholder group (the Positive Deviants) to find better solutions (unique practices/behaviors) to increase high school retention. Based on these discussions, stakeholders will design and determine how to implement interventions making it possible for all stakeholders (students, teachers, parents) to access and practice new behaviors resulting in high school retention.

Phase Five: Collaborative Action Planning

High School Planning Proposal Collaboratives will meet separately and jointly to review the progress of their respective action plans. Action plans will be assessed by stakeholders to determine possible modifications. Stakeholders will also determine how information will be shared throughout their school communities.

4. Disseminating Lessons Learned Beyond Participating High Schools.

Key learnings will be discussed and reviewed at CTA State Council meetings (4 times a year). The Council is a body of 800 teacher leaders representing California teachers. Formal presentations will be made in each of our four administrative regions to CTA staff and leaders. Workshops and training programs will be developed and presented by our CTA Instruction and Professional Development Department. CTA will also disseminate key learnings via the CTA website, magazine and regular formal updates to all 350,000 teacher-members.

The CTA Negotiations and Organizational Development Department, Human Rights Department, and Instruction and Professional Development Department will work with the CTA-IFT in the development of various high school change initiatives based on the key learnings and results from this planning grant.

5. Planning Proposal Evaluation.

This planning proposal was designed to create informed and energized stakeholder groups to build momentum for stronger, more effective public high schools that can significantly increase student retention rates for African American and Latino students and therefore reduce the high school dropout rate for all students. Data will be collected with the direct involvement of program participants and stakeholders.

The evaluation will focus on assessing stakeholder success at increasing high school student retention. We will use a mixed-methods evaluation strategy (surveys and observations) to provide us with formative data so we can improve our proposal and summative data to show our proposal's impact. The principal investigators will implement the evaluation with Mr. Sternin serving as our advisor on the development of assessment instruments, the analysis of data and reporting of results.

Contact Information if you are interested in attending the August 29 & 30, PD Planning Meetings:

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