

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTING EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

IDENTIFYING ACCURATE INDICATORS (CORE COMPONENT #2 OF 5)

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Early warning systems (EWS) use individual student data to generate indicators of on-track status for graduation, including attendance, behavior, and course performance. States and districts across the nation use these systems to identify off-track students in middle and high school and to design and assess interventions to keep students on track to graduate. Despite the popularity of EWS, research on their implementation is sparse. The REL Northwest report *A practitioner's guide to implementing early warning systems* summarizes what is known about EWS implementation and describes how states, districts, and schools can draw on the research. This summary series describes the five core components of implementing an EWS. The second of those five components is described here.

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Establishing and training a team to use the EWS

2

Identifying accurate indicators

3

Designing and using reports

4

Mapping appropriate interventions to individual student needs

5

Evaluating student progress and intervention effectiveness



Identifying accurate indicators

The primary function of an EWS is to alert the school community (educators, parents, and students) when a student falls off track.

Choosing indicators: Focusing on a small set of indicators allows EWS teams to allocate their time and effort more efficiently. Student characteristics outside the school's control, such as family income, special education status, and new student status, should not be used as indicators (instead, demographic data can be used to check whether all student groups are being supported). Effective indicators are:

- Valid for the intended purpose
- Actionable by schools
- Meaningful and easily understood
- Aligned with district and school priorities

Ensuring local validity and threshold checking:

The literature advises EWS teams to set thresholds for indicators using local data when possible—thresholds vary between districts and even within the same district over time. Teams can set threshold levels by beginning with recommendations from national organizations that have extensive EWS experience.

The ABCs

The literature recommends that districts start with the ABCs as their base set of indicators. The ABCs stand for:

A Attendance



Research has long shown a strong relationship between how often a student misses school and his or her probability of graduating in four years. Most students who do not regularly attend class fall behind in their coursework and consequently see their grades suffer. Poor attendance can also indicate that a student is struggling with health, family, or other issues that are distracting them from their studies.

B Behavior incidents



As few as one suspension in grade 6 may predict whether a student graduates in four years. Behavior incidents can indicate that a student is disengaged with the school environment. Suspensions often cause an additional burden on students to catch up on the material they missed.

C Course performance



Number of course failures and overall grade point average obviously correlate with a student's probability of graduating in four years. If a student fails a course, he or she will need to make up credit outside the regularly scheduled school time to stay on track. Poor course performance can also indicate disengagement at the classroom level.



The information in this summary can be found in the full report: Frazelle, S. & Nagel, A. (2015). *A practitioner's guide to implementing early warning systems* (REL 2015–056). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?ProjectID=396>.