



# FOCUS on Results

Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services

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***FOCUS on Results*** offers valuable, up-to-date information for education stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school administrators, counselors, and others.

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The Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners (RTSL) initiative, a Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services (MDE, OSE-EIS) Mandated Activities Project, strives to ensure positive outcomes for struggling learners by exploring effective secondary school practices and their impact on ALL students.

**This guidance and technical assistance article** explains the Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners initiative, how Reaching and Teaching helps schools to reduce student risk for academic failure and dropout, and shares school success stories. The Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners initiative is part of a coordinated, integrated system—known as Michigan’s Integrated Improvement Initiatives (MI3)—that promotes increased system efficiencies and effectiveness as well as improved student performance.

## **Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners Initiative: A Whole Student, Whole Team, Whole Building Approach**

by Leisa Gallagher

The Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners (RTSL) initiative, a Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services (MDE, OSE-EIS) Mandated Activities Project, strives to ensure positive outcomes for struggling learners by exploring effective secondary school practices and their impact on ALL students.

The RTSL initiative formed its first cohort of 15 secondary schools in the 2007-2008 school year. Each school has a team consisting of principals, parents, counselors, general educators, special educators, school improvement leaders, and technical educators. Each team in the cohort selects 15-20 students who may be at risk for academic failure and dropout.

Each team studies their own group of struggling learners and conducts a collaborative data inquiry to explore

whether their building’s system meets the needs of these students. The RTSL initiative provides support for the cohort over a three-year period to strengthen the cohort’s collaboration among colleagues, to increase trust between them and their struggling learners, and to foster a culture of high expectation for all students at the school. The RTSL initiative facilitates a learning community for the cohort. The teams share data, observations, and ideas with each other and their staff as each team works to create positive outcomes for students by addressing school improvement practices.

Secondary redesign research often focuses on the three “Rs”—Relationships, Rigor, and Relevance. A point of emphasis for this initiative is improving staff-student relationships to increase the likelihood of student success. Without prioritizing



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relationships, the relevance and rigor of the curriculum is less likely to have a positive impact on student achievement.

This *FOCUS on Results* article shares school success stories about how the Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners (RTSL) initiative helps schools to reduce the risk for student academic failure and dropout. The RTSL initiative is part of a coordinated, integrated system—known as Michigan’s Integrated Improvement Initiatives (MI3)—that promotes increased system efficiencies and effectiveness as well as improved student performance.

The RTSL initiative’s structure is based on the following concepts:

**Shared Leadership**—School improvement is a function of a cohesive team rather than a byproduct of a charismatic leader. Shared leadership must be part of the school culture.

**Teams Are Coached**—Facilitators from each school attend their own professional development days and support the school teams during the teams’ professional development days.

**Teams Align Their Practice With the Michigan School Improvement Framework**—The team follows school improvement strands: school-community partnerships, quality data systems, shared leadership, professional learning, and teaching for learning.

**Teams Make Data-Based Decisions Aligned With Dropout Prevention Practices**—Effective dropout prevention practices include: tiered levels of secondary literacy interventions; high impact instructional practice; math support across course content areas; student-centered, strength-based approaches; successful transitions across middle and high school grade levels with a particular emphasis placed on success from 8th to 9th grade; and social and emotional skill promotion.

Since February 2008, 15 building teams involved in the RTSL initiative have strengthened the teaming and teaching practices needed to reduce student risk

for academic failure and dropout. Almost 100 middle and high school educators have worked to study the early warning signs of dropout and to adopt the interventions needed for struggling students. These schools are working through a research-to-practice cycle, which includes studying how to build a system that achieves success for each and every student. These secondary buildings are focusing on how to achieve successful transitions from 8th to 9th grade to ensure that their current or future freshmen stay on track for graduation and postsecondary success.

The schools in the initiative have three years to become more socially cohesive, student centered, and effective with their struggling learners, which includes students with disabilities. Their efforts mirror the challenge identified by researchers studying how 9th graders become “on or off track.” Johns Hopkins researcher, Ruth Curran Neild, has identified a variety of factors that contribute to the success or failure of a freshman in high school. Her work, highlighting the significance of this entry-level grade, addresses the negative and positive influences of family, friends, and teachers. She notes that freshmen with a history of academic failure are particularly vulnerable to falling off track when they enter high school. The risk is even greater when students, due to this lack of proficiency, also reflect poor study skills and inconsistent access to helpful adults. Everyone is impacted by an infrastructure which lacks the social networks and supports needed for students to catch up.

Perhaps the most relevant aspect of Curran Neild’s study is the effect that the buildings’ structures have on 9th graders. The research attributes the organization of schools as a contributing risk factor. Schools that are bureaucratically, rather than communally, organized are likely to increase the dropout rate. These schools may not have the capacity to promote positive student engagement nor build the time outside of class needed to support student progress. Curran Neild reiterates the small schools research by

noting that schools with student populations greater than 1,000 are more likely to de-emphasize teacher/student engagement. In these larger buildings, teacher allegiance may be organized along departmental, rather than schoolwide, student-centered goals. In addition, rather than matching struggling students with the most experienced teachers, 9th graders may be paired with less qualified or less experienced teachers.

The RTSL teams are working to empower their buildings to address these structural issues. All the teams are finding time to help students catch up. The teams are investigating their students' reading and math needs. Simultaneously, these teams are studying—through case scenarios—whether their students have the personal and social skills required to transition into and become successful in high school.

DeWitt Jr. High School, Greenville Middle School, Jefferson Middle School, and Morrice Jr. High School are looking at the system improvements needed as students begin 6th grade. The following success story describes Greenville's effort to adopt a universal tier of literacy intervention.

### **Greenville Middle School: Grade-Level Work Shifts to Schoolwide Literacy**

Greenville Middle School staff selected literacy as their target after analyzing the entire student population's reading scores. Before participation in the RTSL initiative, staff had interventions in English language arts, by grade, but they did not have a schoolwide literacy approach. Within a semester of joining the initiative, the staff institutionalized a reading program in which every student, every day, in every class, reads for 30 minutes. One member of the team reported, "Our students are talking like readers, as if they were in Oprah's book club."

Greenville's adoption of the Accelerated Reader (AR) program required a shift from a departmental/grade level

strategy to a schoolwide literacy effort. In addition to the satisfaction of hearing students talk about their books, staff reported additional benefits:

- An increase in literacy attainment.
- An increase in parent involvement (parents held fund raisers to support the new literacy initiative).
- An increase in the use of the library.

The media specialist noted that more library materials were checked out in one month than had been borrowed in the entire last year. Student results for Greenville Middle School will be available at the end of next school year (in 2010).

As all of these middle schools drive their individual progress, they join their high school partners to explore the quality of their data-based decision making.

### **Building a Culture of Quality Data**

In order to adopt a target of literacy, math, and behavior, all the RTSL teams collected and analyzed more comprehensive data, which better reflected the needs of the whole child (see Figure 1 on page 5). Each team collected student data in four areas: personal/social skill attainment, student engagement, core academics, and stretch learning. The International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) developed, and communicated through their Model Schools Summits, these four learning criteria. These domains are critical to developing an adequate needs assessment for struggling learners. This approach to data analysis is consistent with the literature in Breaking Ranks and dropout prevention research. The ICLE has contributed much to secondary redesign by articulating the need to use the learning criteria in order for educators to inquire about how student engagement and academic performance interact.

Each team selected 15-20 students about whom the staff felt ill-equipped to reach and/or teach. Once selected, staff obtained the more comprehensive data sets and began assembling a plan to improve their system. The collaborative

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## Team Receives Coaching and Consultation of Professional Development to Team and Staff

data review surfaced patterns about how student behaviors were impacting course failures.

Tardies, missing homework, and zeroes were not necessarily associated with deficits in student abilities.

Conversely, As and Bs in core courses did not translate into strong scores

on standardized tests. The team dialogue which began with the four learning criteria led to more substantive questions about grading practices and the need for study skills. As a result, many of the high schools in the initiative have created time in the school day to address the social and personal skills needed.

As all schools addressed the needs of the whole child, many of the high schools realized they didn't have the structures in place to meet the needs of their struggling learners, especially when their students' proficiency levels were two or more grade levels behind.

Atherton High School, Fruitport High School, Kenowa Hills High School, Kent Transition Center, Lincoln Park High School, Morrice Sr. High School, Northwest High School, Novi High School, Suttons Bay High School, Thurston High School, Waterford Mott High School, and Wavecrest Career Academy are all finding time for these additional supports. The story below describes how Fruitport High School approached the challenge of building time in the school day.

### Fruitport High School: 9th Grade Guided Academics

Fruitport High School selected math, literacy, and behavioral targets to address the needs of those students at risk for dropout. Rather than selecting 15 students already in high school, the team selected their struggling learners who were a semester away from becoming freshmen. The team worked with middle school staff in order to find which students—as perceived by the middle school staff—were struggling. In order to support a strong transition from

8th to 9th grade, the team partnered with colleagues at the middle school level to administer reading assessments and to collect data within the other three categories of the learning criteria. The high school team hand-scheduled the core academic classes for this group of students. In addition, the team added a class at the end of the day within which they could provide more supportive services.

During this pilot class, entitled "Guided Academics," students had an opportunity to improve their literacy skills, complete assignments, participate in service learning, and receive support from their older classmates—members of a student leadership group.

By the end of the first semester, which is a critical time period for buildings to monitor the early warning signs for dropout, most of the students in guided academics were passing three out of four core academic classes. While this success seems a modest achievement, for most of the students, elementary school was the last time any of them had passed a core class.

In addition to adding Guided Academics, the principal and the team reorganized their school improvement practices and set targets according to the four learning criteria. School improvement materials were distributed to parents and the community with measurable goals to be achieved within the school year.

While the Fruitport team may not have been aware that their attempts were decreasing the bureaucracy about which Curran Neild warned, their efforts helped to equalize the influence of departmental decision making by adopting schoolwide school improvement targets.

### Screening Tools and Responding With Appropriate Interventions

After schools analyzed their individual building data, all the schools were invited to explore the adoption of the eight practices of Response to Intervention (RtI) (see boxed item on page 7). Schools

### The Importance of Relationships

The goal of Reaching and Teaching is for students to become more invested in their education and schools to become more invested in their students, resulting in greater achievements for students.

Once a trust is formed between students and teachers, as well as among the community as a whole, the impact of the curriculum takes greater effect. The emphasis on building student-teacher relationships benefits the entire student population.



spend the second year of the initiative learning how to build such a system. Each team needed to know the scope of student needs. In order to quantify the need, many schools began with a universal screening tool. This screening is a critical first step in assessing how to build the tiers of intervention.

At the beginning of the second year, all the teams compared their struggling students' early warning signs against any other students who might also be experiencing academic failure. Teams reviewed how many of their students had been retained, had attendance problems, and were two grade levels below in reading and math proficiency.

Early warning sign research and tools are available through the National High School Center at [www.betterhighschools.org](http://www.betterhighschools.org). Though some of the schools reported a familiarity with some of the risk factors,

they may not have had the tools to screen for literacy and/or math. By the end of the second year, most of the schools in the initiative had conducted curriculum-based assessments in reading and/or math.

The use of either the AIMSweb system or the Northwest Evaluation Association screening tool provided the teams with information about the depth of the learning challenges in the building. These screening tools, more commonly found at the elementary level, are designed to assist the schools in how to build tiers of intervention.

In the upcoming year of the initiative, the schools will use the screening information in order to match student need with evidence-based interventions in literacy and/or math. The administration of the assessment for students in either 6th or 9th grade will provide snapshots of information, which

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**Figure 1: Whole-Child, Whole-Team, Whole-School Approach**

Whole-Child/Family	Whole-Team	Whole-School
<b>Learning Criteria #1 Personal/Social Skills—</b> Study Skills, Team Work, Conflict Resolution, Goal Setting	<b>Team Member Likely to Have Data About #1:</b> Social Worker/Counselor/ Health Educator, Family	All Staff Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross Disciplinary Work</li> <li>• Shared Values</li> <li>• Departmental Units Aligned With Shared Values</li> <li>• Responsibility for Students Outside of Class</li> <li>• Changed Environments to Build Time to Support Struggling Learners</li> <li>• Resources Are Less Influenced by the Categoricals</li> </ul>
<b>Learning Criteria #2 Engagement Data—</b> Attendance, Behavior	<b>Team Member Likely to Have Data About #2:</b> Administrator, Classroom Teacher, Teacher Consultant, School Improvement Lead	
<b>Learning Criteria #3 Core Academics Data—</b> English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies	<b>Team Member Likely to Have Data About #3:</b> Principal, Classroom Teacher, School Improvement Lead, Counselor/Social Worker, Special Educator	
<b>Learning Criteria #4 Stretch Learning Data—</b> Access to Enrichment Learning Beyond the Class as Well as Advanced Placement/ International Baccalaureate Courses	<b>Team Member Likely to Have Data About #4:</b> Social Worker/Counselor/ Health Educator, Family	



**“A better prepared middle school student is likely to have a more successful transition into high school.”**

should indicate how much time and which interventions are needed to produce positive student results.

The RTSL initiative leaders believe that a better prepared middle school student is likely to have a more successful transition into high school—an environment that is experienced by the student as a new level of schooling. While middle school students may not be oriented to the issue of credit attainment, they will be at the senior high. Improved core subject proficiency is likely to lower the risks inherent in changing schools. For example, a better reader is likely to have the emotional energy to take on the challenge of learning new study skills or team building skills. After becoming a more mature, self-directed learner in high school, a high school graduate is more likely to achieve better postsecondary outcomes—a target for all educators, especially those in the transition community.

### **Secondary RtI**

Secondary level adoption of RtI presents unique challenges statewide and nationally. Barriers to common planning time for teachers, uneven literacy supports, and building size are often cited as features of high school reform that make the work difficult. Teams have reported their appreciation for having three years in the RTSL initiative in order to move into an RtI model. This systems approach builds efficiencies for meeting the needs of all learners. The teams are working with their colleagues to adopt all eight practices of RtI.

Sharing schoolwide goals helps teachers build a sense of collective efficacy, sometimes referred to as teaming. Mutual efforts are likely to build social networks, especially needed by new teachers, and may lead to new sources of support in terms of parent involvement and community collaborations. All the teams have worked to make sure this connectedness moves beyond the school walls.

Social cohesion seems to improve parent involvement. Fruitport conducted home visits for all of the students enrolled in their guided academics class, Kent Transition Center has a clothes and school materials closet (run by parent volunteers), Morrice asked a parent to serve on their Reaching and Teaching team, Greenville parents raised money to buy more AR quizzes since demand had exceeded the school’s budget, and Suttons Bay has improved relationships with their Native American students’ families and tribal elders. To read more about the Suttons Bay story, watch for the upcoming article *Suttons Bay High School: Learning Together to Improve Student Achievement for All Students* at [www.cenmi.org/Documents/FocusOnResults.aspx](http://www.cenmi.org/Documents/FocusOnResults.aspx).

### **RTSL Promotes Positive School Culture**

The RTSL buildings regularly monitor how successfully their vision is being communicated to their neighborhoods and families. For the RTSL teams, evidence of their shared vision must translate into a positive school culture.

As a pre-test to measure the positive quality of their school culture, all the buildings administered the Aspirations Survey to staff and to students. The survey revealed how effectively the teachers engaged one another and how effectively they engaged their students. The results helped the administrators, teachers, and staff review the degree to which they are welcoming and supportive to all students and their families. Kenowa Hills High School trained 30 teachers in Capturing Kids Hearts this summer in response to their survey results. To download free tools



and activities, including surveys, from *Leading With Trust* by Susan Stephenson, visit <http://go.solutions-tree.com/leadership>.

To support the work of the whole staff, the teams received professional development for team facilitators. Facilitator professional development occurred before each large group meeting and emphasized the need to build 'relational trust' with each other and their students. According to *Trust in Schools*, Bryk and Schnieder report that high achieving schools exhibit large amounts of relational trust with students and with their families. Facilitators were trained in learning community practices, trust-building dialogue skills, and collaborative problem solving.

Teams and facilitators have noted that positive student engagement has become a much higher priority. The RTSL leadership group holds to the theory that as teachers are supported, they are more likely to support their students. The teams explored the congruence between their beliefs and their practices. Were they walking the talk of 'all children can succeed'? Most staff report a fundamental shift within their team and among their staff. They have moved from trying to change the

students to helping the adults change practices.

## Systems Change and RTSL

All school reform addresses the issue of shared leadership. For the RTSL initiative, in addition to improving culture, teams reflected on the need for the principal to be an instructional leader. Principals have attended, with their teaching staff, the large group professional development. At times, they have attended the facilitator learning opportunities. Principals have broken barriers and added resources to help the team's work. This shared leadership model includes interactions between students and staff, staff to team, facilitator to team, team to principals, and teams to district staff (see Figure 2 on page 10).

Clearly the teams are walking the talk of the first "R" in "Relationships, Rigor, and Relevance." The phrase often repeated around the table has been, "I don't care what you know until I know that you care." Teams have reported that the result of their efforts has led students to demonstrating persistence and success in the face of sometimes overwhelming challenges.

**Response to Intervention (RtI)**—A scientifically research-based approach that identifies students not achieving at benchmark and provides a collaborative problem-solving framework to address their learning needs as well as the needs of all students. The eight practices of RtI are:

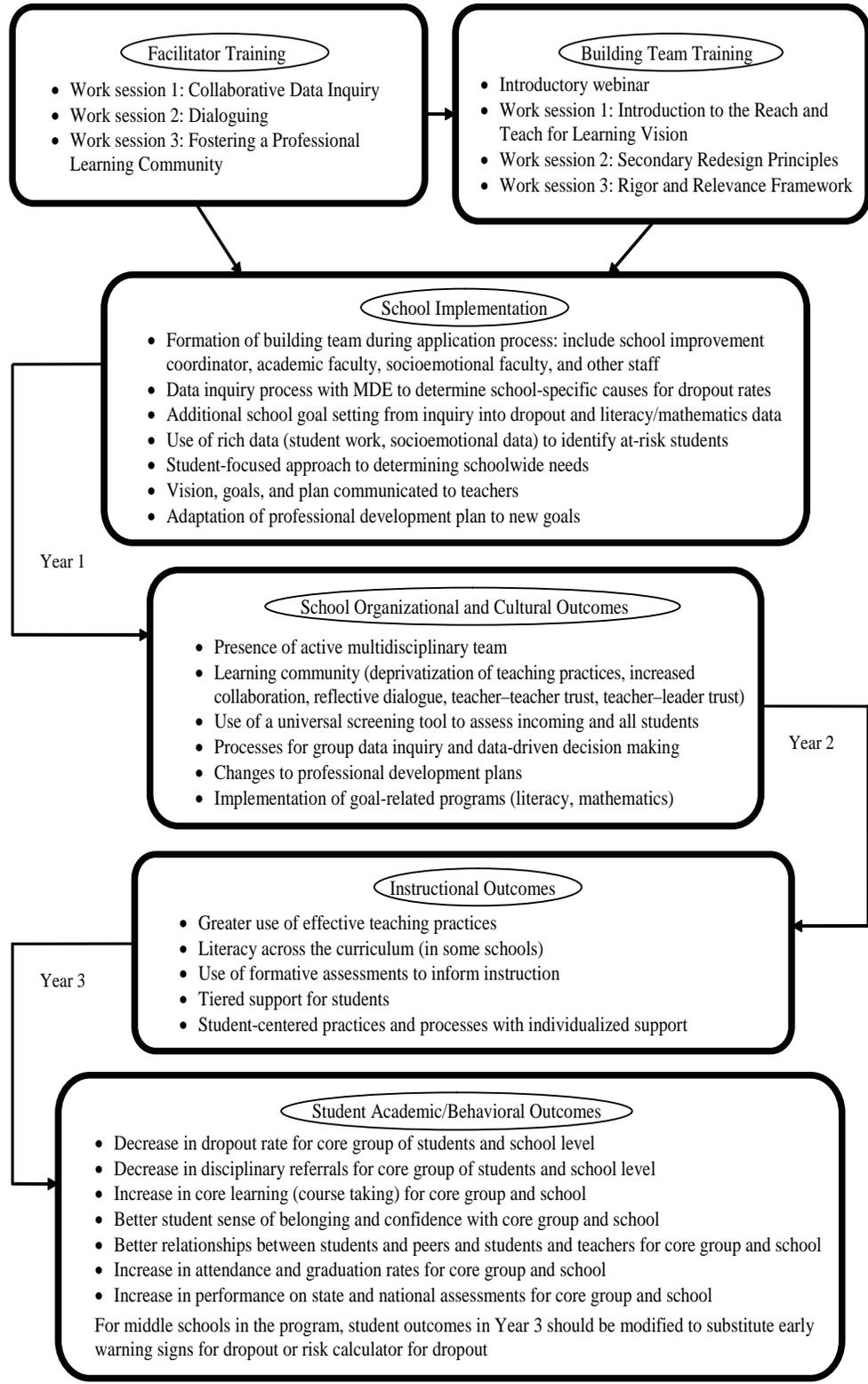
1. Shared belief that each and every child can succeed.
2. Adoption of early intervention practices.
3. Adoption of research-based interventions.
4. Use of multiple assessments.
5. Implementation of tiers of intervention.
6. [Team use of] data-based decision making.
7. [Team use of] shared problem solving.
8. [Team use of] progress monitoring.

Source: Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education (MAASE) publication, *Response to Intervention—Enhancing the Learning of All Children*.



The Center for Educational Networking (CEN) is a statewide education information network that produces and disseminates publications and documents related to the education of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

## Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners Initiative's Theory of Action



## Fifteen Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention

**Systemic Renewal**—Systemic renewal calls for a continuing process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners.

**School-Community Collaboration**—When all groups in a community provide collective support to the school, a strong infrastructure sustains a caring environment where youth can thrive and achieve.

**Safe Learning Environments**—A comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, must deal with potential violence as well as crisis management. A safe learning environment provides daily experiences, at all grade levels, that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students.

**Family Engagement**—Research consistently finds that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on children’s achievement and is one of the most accurate predictors of a student’s success in school.

**Early Childhood Education**—Birth-to-five interventions demonstrate that providing a child additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who will ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of their school experience through the primary grades.

**Early Literacy Development**—Early interventions to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all subjects.

**Mentoring/Tutoring**—Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity, focuses on academics and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies.

**Service-Learning**—Service-learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching/learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels.

**Alternative Schooling**—Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student’s individual social needs and academic requirements for a high school diploma.

**After-School Opportunities**—Many schools provide after-school and summer enhancement programs that eliminate information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure because they fill the afternoon “gap time” with constructive and engaging activities.

**Professional Development**—Teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need to feel supported and have an avenue by which they can continue to develop skills, techniques, and learn about innovative strategies.

**Active Learning**—Active learning embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. Students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners when educators show them that there are different ways to learn.

**Educational Technology**—Technology offers some of the best opportunities for delivering instruction to engage students in authentic learning, addressing multiple intelligences, and adapting to students’ learning styles.

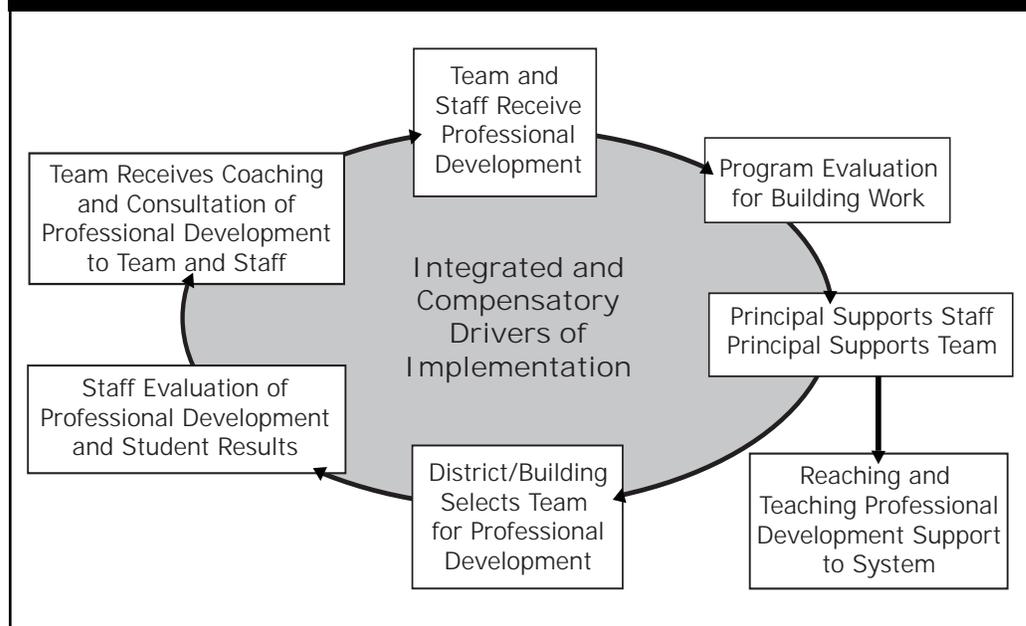
**Individualized Instruction**—Each student has unique interests and past learning experiences. An individualized instructional program for each student allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies to consider these individual differences.

**Career and Technical Education (CTE)**—A quality CTE program and a related guidance program are essential for all students. School-to-work programs recognize that youth need specific skills to prepare them to measure up to the increased demands of today’s workplace.

*Source: National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC), [www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org).*



**Figure 2: Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners Initiative's Implementation of High School Redesign and Dropout Prevention Strategies**



**For more information on the Reaching and Teaching Struggling Learners initiative, contact:**

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## RESOURCES

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[www.leadered.com](http://www.leadered.com)

**National High School Center**  
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**Ruth Curran Neild Research**  
[www.researchforaction.org/staff/details/45](http://www.researchforaction.org/staff/details/45)

**Breaking Ranks Resources**  
[www.principalspartnership.com/resource.html](http://www.principalspartnership.com/resource.html)

**Breaking Ranks in the Middle:  
Strategies for Leading Middle School Reform**  
<http://sharedwork.org/documents/BreakingRanksintheMiddle.pdf>

**Breaking Ranks II:  
Strategies for Leading High School Reform Executive Summary**  
[www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc/institutes\\_2005/documents/Ollarvia\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc/institutes_2005/documents/Ollarvia_executive_summary.pdf)

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