Welcome to RAPSA’s Quarterly Journal

RAPSA is in the process of building a network of committed professionals who want to establish best practices for serving at-promise students and advocate for policies that support student success.

This fourth issue of our quarterly publication provides five articles about research and initiatives across the country that explore solutions for serving out-of-school and other high-risk youth. We’ve also included links to news that may inform strategies that you develop to serve at-promise students.

- Where Are You Now?: Measuring Impact With Alumni Outcomes
- Policy And Emerging Research Of Evidence-Based Academic Interventions In Alternative High Schools
- At-Promise Movement Gains Momentum!
- Measuring Quality In Alternative Charter Schools: Help For Authorizers And Schools That Serve At-Promise Students
- Kentucky’s Legislative Efforts To Lower Dropout Rates

We hope that this journal becomes a platform for sharing strategies, research and support among education, community and workforce leaders who serve the 16-24 year old at-promise population. Please feel free to submit articles to me by email (ernie.silva@siatech.org) about your own successes and ideas for improving our work here.

We welcome suggestions for a name for this journal. Perhaps you prefer “RAPSA Quarterly Review,” “AtPromise Journal,” or have another suggestions. Email your vote or idea to me (ernie.silva@siatech.org).

Finally, we encourage your active membership in RAPSA. Please find a membership level that meets your needs. This quarter, new members will earn a $50 discount on the 2020 RAPSA Forum registration.

Thank you for your passion and commitment.

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With graduation rates now above 80 percent in Kentucky, it might be hard to believe the Commonwealth once ranked 50th in the nation in the percentage of adults with a high school diploma and 49th in percentage of college graduates. The Kentucky Education Reform Act in 1990 was sweeping legislation that restructured and redefined the way the state designed, delivered, governed and financed education. Kentucky continued to adopt multiple education reform laws to aggressively tackle the high school “dropout crisis” and track holistic interventions throughout the state to increase high school graduation rates. Kentucky created a strategy to address school dropout problems by the Department by providing technical assistance, grants, and disseminating information to school districts and school level personnel. A link to the new Practice Briefs appears at the end of this article.

To implement the Commonwealth's focus on high school graduation, the Kentucky Department of Education created The Persistence to Graduation Initiative in 2015. This initiative provides a variety of supports to schools and districts to identify students who may be off-track for and provide interventions to support students until they earn a diploma. The work has evolved to include an emphasis on equity because, as graduation rates in Kentucky increase overall, graduation rates for students of color, students in alternative settings, migrant and immigrant populations, youth in foster care, rural settings, low-income neighborhoods, and students with disabilities continue to lag behind. Kentucky benefits from having a single student information system that is used for all schools and districts in the Commonwealth, allowing for robust use of data at the school, district, and state levels. The Early Warning tool allows school and district staff to have a complete understanding of the many factors that are contributing to students dropping out and to determine which interventions will be the most successful in helping the student get back on track. Every student in grades 6-12 is provided with a GRAD (Graduation-Related Analytic Data) Score based on various data points such as attendance, behavior, grades, enrollment history, demographics, test scores, household demographics, school type, and more. The Early Warning tool uses machine learning to improve its accuracy over time. The Persistence to Graduation report is available for all grade levels and assigns each student a risk score based on attendance, behavior, course performance, and demographics using live data each time the report is run.
Kentucky has made considerable efforts to raise awareness of promising and successful practices throughout the commonwealth that are in alignment with Kentucky’s dropout prevention goals. The Persistence to Graduation Summit is an annual gathering hosted by the Kentucky Department of Education every summer that provides participants with the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of dropout prevention and reengagement strategies. Many of Kentucky’s Persistence to Graduation efforts are focused promoting and sharing best practices within four focus areas: Alternative Education, Community Partnerships, Culture and Climate, and Student Transitions and Reengagement. Districts and schools are encouraged to apply these practices using a holistic approach. The four focus areas are further explored in a series of accompanying practice briefs that highlight the importance of each and feature schools and programs from across the state. Inequitable access and income inequality continue to shape the current education system and pose a serious threat to future gains. There is much work to be done, and the practice briefs can serve as a guide for educators throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky who seek to improve outcomes for students and families. The Kentucky Department of Education hopes these four practice briefs will be beneficial to educators and practitioners of all types. Examples represent successful practices in rural, suburban, and urban programs, schools, and districts, as well with various student populations in traditional and alternative settings with both small and large class sizes.

The Kentucky Department of Education has released a publication entitled Persistence to Graduation, co-written by Samaura Stone, Senior Policy Associate at AYPF, and Nancy Martin, Consultant. The publication consists of a full report and four individual practice briefs in the areas of: Alternative Education, Community Partnerships, Culture and Climate, and Student Transitions and Reengagement.

More information is available at: https://education.ky.gov/school/Pages/Persistence-to-Graduation.aspx
In theory, public charter schools are allowed to operate free from bureaucratic rules while being held accountable for strong student outcomes. This bargain depends on accurate, reliable accountability measures plus ambitious targets informed by convincing data.

But for Alternative Education Campuses (or AECs) — schools that set out to serve students who have been unsuccessful in traditional settings — traditional measures of accountability may be neither accurate nor reliable. Achievement rates on state tests, four-year graduation rates, and other standard metrics may not say much about the actual performance of a school whose students have a history of academic struggle. And scant data is available to help educators shape appropriate targets for success. For this small group of schools, getting accountability right is a challenge.

And getting accountability right for AECs is the focus of A-GAME (Advancing Great Authorizing and Modeling Excellence), a project funded by a USDOE Charter School Program dissemination grant and led by the National Charter Schools Institute and its partner, longtime AEC research and measurement experts Momentum Strategy & Research.

A-GAME's objective is to work with charter authorizers from across the country to develop tools that can be used by other authorizers to create meaningful accountability strategies with their AECs. The project is informed by a 11 member National Authorizer Leadership Team reflecting diversity of both geography and authorizer type: school and county districts, state departments of education, universities, non-profit organizations, and independent chartering boards.

The first A-GAME resource, Measuring Quality: A Resource Guide for Authorizers and Alternative Charter Schools, released in October 2019, provides seven concrete recommendations for authorizers and their charter AECs—including identifying the appropriate set of schools that qualify for alternative accountability; working with charter AECs to develop relevant and rigorous accountability measures and targets, and thinking outside the box about how to measure performance in five specific areas:

1. Student engagement and motivation
2. Academic achievement
3. Academic growth
4. High school completion
5. College & career readiness

Measuring Quality In Alternative Charter Schools: Help For Authorizers And Schools That Serve At-Promise Students
By Naomi DeVeaux and Jim Goenner, PhD, National Charter School Institute; Jody Ernst, PhD and Jim Griffin JD, Momentum Strategies and Research; and Nelson Smith
What Measuring Quality demonstrates is that authorizers needn't think of alternative accountability as somehow strange or mysterious. It shows how authorizers can look at traditional accountability domains through a different lens, using measures and metrics that make more sense for AECs while still meeting state standards and local requirements.

The A-GAME team stresses that the Guide is not a rigid template but a set of strategies and resources adaptable to any authorizing context. Creating rigorous yet achievable targets for AECs requires a body of comparison data on schools that serve similar populations – which has been notably lacking until now. This is a particular hardship for authorizers with just one or two AECs. Accordingly, A-GAME is now developing a web-based data tool summarizing performance outcomes for AECs using publicly available national and state data. With this tool people can find typical AEC rates on important accountability measures: What do 10th-grade reading scores look like for students like mine? How do other AEC high schools do on grad rates (4-year, 5-year, and 6-year cohorts)? The A-GAME will be adding new data sets as they become available over time.

Additionally, A-GAME has begun working directly with the alternative schools overseen by its authorizer team, collecting data on measures and metrics not available publicly. The goal is to gather enough data to begin assessing typical outcomes for students enrolled in AECs on measures such as social-emotional development, school engagement and motivation, and changes in attendance or credit-earning rates over time – allowing AEC leaders and authorizers a point of comparison when setting their own performance goals.

Watch for another set of resources to be released in early February – rubrics for the review of new AEC applications and renewal of existing alternative charters. These and more resources will be available on the A-GAME website and will continue to be available beyond the completion of the grant.

An analysis of public school count data from the NCES website shows that AECs, as defined by their own state policies, account for approximately 5 percent of all public schools. Charter schools identified as AECs, by state or local policy, account for less than 1 percent of all public schools and less than 20 percent of all public AECs.
At RAPSA’s 2019 Forum, nearly 300 education and workforce leaders came together to celebrate AB 413 – the Nation’s first legislation replacing the “at-risk” label with the inspiring “at-promise” articulation in both the California Education and Penal Codes. RAPSA has begun developing a tool chest for leaders looking for curriculum, policy statements, and research explaining the importance of the term. https://rapsa.org/at-promise-tool-kit/

The Changing At-Risk to At-Promise Tool Kit will continue to grow with your submittals. We’re looking for copies of editorials, curriculum, student projects, and legislation from other states. One of the critical issues is adopting a working definition of what “at-promise” encompasses. RAPSA will be opening an online platform to capture your vision and your suggestions for how we articulate at-promise in a way that is constructive, reflective and functional.

California Legislator Reginald Jones-Sawyer, the author of the bill, was in attendance at the Policy Forum to provide the keynote address and receive RAPSA’s Vision Award. Attendees also enjoyed a special screening of the ground breaking film, “The Pushouts” facilitated by film producer Dawn Valadez. The Pushouts illuminates the schools to prison pipeline issues that push students out of school and into low-paying jobs and the criminal justice system. The story is told through the experience of Victor Rios who combines the authentic experience of growing up gang immersed in urban violence and as an academic researcher and professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Dr. Rios has published the first book to focus on using at-promise curriculum to encourage and grow students who face poverty, violence and trauma so that they know that they are at-promise of strong futures and productive lives.
Between October and now, there’s been a lot of activity among education leaders to shift the conversation from the risk faced by students to their promise. Please write me and let know what else is happening in your school, district or county.

- RAPSA’s October 16 Changing From At-Risk to At-Promise webinar with RAPSA Board Member, Julie Evans;
- November 14 AB 413 Author Reginald Jones-Sawyer provides RAPSA Forum’s Keynote Address
- November 14 through the 16th Board Member and Journalism Professor Matthew LaPlante conducts a series of interviews with Forum attendees to capture how RAPSA participants are leading the change
- December 16 AB 413 Signing Celebration Event in Los Angeles featuring Assembly Member Jones-Sawyer, Senator Steven Bradford, RAPSA President Linda Dawson, Los Angeles County Office of Education Superintendent Debra Duardo, Los Angeles Unified Superintendent Austin Buettner and Education Consultant Larry Bell.
- January 9th Education Week was the first national publication to write about the growing use of At-Promise instead of at-risk.
- February 12th CBS was the first television network to feature a story about the impact on students from changing at-risk to at-promise.

Finally, at their February 25th meeting, the RAPSA Board and Advisory Committee Members finalized five major projects to advance the at-promise movement over the next year.

Define At-Promise Students. Advisory Committee Member Joe Herrity Joseph_Herrity@sccoe.org will be leading an effort to create a practical definition of who at-promise students are. His interest is in recognizing and differentiating definitions of Opportunity Youth and others. Larry Bell has encouraged the development of an On Line interactive platform for sharing ideas and finding a consensus.

Survey Practitioners. Board Member Julie Evans JEvans@tomorrow.org will lead the effort to Identify Needs and Strategies for Serving At-Promise Students. Julie’s Project Tomorrow is a leader in the field of educational surveys and will develop a survey of at-promise youth and adult supporters to identify needs of at-promise students.

Media Outreach. Board Member Mathew LaPlante matthew.laplante@usu.edu will work with RAPSA Members to develop essays and opinion pieces based on interviews at the Forum. Board Member Tony Simmons will work with Matthew to develop place Pod Casts based on issues raised in the essays.

Develop RAPSA At-Promise School Designation. Board Member Tony Simmons tony@hsra.org will identify practices and characteristics of schools successfully serving at-promise students for National recognition. The work product may result in physical awards; media pieces; and recognition at RAPSA Forum.

Identify At-Promise Curriculum and Pedagogy. This fifth project is looking for a Leader. The foundation of RAPSA is to provide professional development for education and community leaders serving at-promise students. RAPSA can be the repository of emerging best practices and work to distribute these practices.

If you’re interested in working on any of the five projects or have advice for direction, send me a note or contact the leader of the project that you are interested in.
For nearly a decade, educational policy advocates, researchers, practitioners, state and local leaders, and organizations engage at the annual Reaching At-Promise Students Association (RAPSA) Forum to discuss relevant accountability systems for schools serving students at-promise. In 2015, The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presented an opportunity for RAPSA Forum participants to advance ongoing efforts to design and improve accountability measurement systems for alternative schools. However, alternative schools vary in purpose, size, students served, curriculum, instruction, type and length of programs, and supports available. The flexibility allowed in state’s ESSA plans empowered states to identify meaningful indicators to evaluate high-quality alternative schools. Schools that do not meet indicators on state accountability plans are required to implement interventions that meet the ESSA evidence-based intervention definition of “demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes” based on “well-designed and well-implemented” studies. Schools identified for school improvement (e.g., Targeted Support and Improvement [TSI], Additional Targeted Support and Improvement [ATSI], and Comprehensive Support and Improvement [CSI]) must include evidence-based interventions demonstrating the highest three levels of evidence defined in ESSA, necessitating identification of evidence-based interventions that qualify.

Along with additional focus of the RAPSA Forum on teaching and learning within the past years, researchers sought to identify academic interventions implemented in alternative high schools. To date, no systematic review that addresses the effectiveness of academic interventions with students who attend alternative high schools is available. Therefore, researchers conducted a systematic review of the available research of academic interventions implemented in alternative high schools.

A comprehensive search of academic interventions implemented in alternative high schools from 1970 to 2020 identified studies that relate to computer skills, biology, mathematics, fluency and comprehension. Academic interventions ranged from 10 to 75 min delivered up to 10 weeks by special education teachers, general education teachers, and university partners. Findings were limited to the inconsistent reporting of intervention characteristics. Measures of achievement, content knowledge, accuracy of proficiency and understanding, and computation resulted in favorable academic outcomes. However, the studies did not meet high-quality indicators for experimental research studies. Low methodological quality was due to the type of research design and infrequent reporting of fidelity of implementation which limits our understanding if the intervention was delivered with quality as it was intended. Additionally, few authors administered standardized measures which minimizes our generalizability of broader academic achievement impact.
Furthermore, when considering the ESSA definitions of evidence, the available reviewed research is determined to qualify as Level 3 Promising Evidence based on the low-quality study design, study sample size, and number of settings. The findings of the few available studies of low methodological quality have important implications for educational leaders of alternative high schools as leaders are accountable for improving outcomes of all students.

As researchers, practitioners, and policymakers seek to identify evidence-based interventions to target the unique needs of students served in alternative high schools, considerably more research is needed. Future research must align to ESSA's evidence-based definition of well-designed and well-implemented studies to address the absence of currently available research. Interventions must be implemented school-wide in alternative high schools to achieve the number of participants and multisite requirement to meet ESSA's evidence-based definition for Level 1 Strong Evidence and Level 2 Moderate Evidence. Intense time, effort, and research expertise is required to generate rigorous evidence in alternative high schools. Thus, a collaborative approach of partnerships between alternative high schools and researchers may be ideal to investigate interventions of high methodological quality that meets ESSA's definition.
High schools that re-engage youth who are off-track or dropped out (at-promise youth) have impacts well beyond a student’s graduation day. Graduating from high school is associated with a long list of positive life outcomes, including higher employment rates and wages, better health and mental health, and a greater likelihood of postsecondary education. In New Mexico, for example, a high school graduate is half as likely to be unemployed as peers who never finished school (American Community Survey).

Future Focused Education is an Albuquerque-based nonprofit organization that works to create healthier and more prosperous communities by advancing the best education for the students who need it the most. We facilitate the Leadership Schools Network (LSN), a network of choice across four high schools with a re-engagement mission and a shared three-pillar model: (1) community and industry engagement, (2) holistic student support, and (3) learning by doing.

Because the LSN schools target at-promise students, they do not fare well on traditional metrics of school success. In 2017, they embarked on a journey to identify mission-specific performance measures. Future Focused Education led the process, beginning with a series of appreciative inquiry interviews and culminating this year with the roll out of the LSN Integrated Data System. The system and associated tools help schools measure progress on their shared alternative measures.

LSN leaders identified alumni outcomes as essential, and have begun to measure postsecondary employment, enrollment in college or training programs, and credentials earned by their alumni. In the future, they hope to also measure the degree to which alumni have high-quality or meaningful work, although this will need further definition. The distinction between low- and high-quality employment is important because recent research out of Brookings demonstrates that adults from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to have high-quality jobs (Ross, M. A. et al., 2018).

Many traditional schools and districts rely on National Student Clearinghouse data to track college-going outcomes, but this tells a very incomplete story, as they do not include enrollment in workforce training programs, apprenticeships, and other forms of non-credit-bearing educational programs. The LSN schools have opted to rely on outreach to collect information from graduates, but this is not without its challenges.

Challenges collecting these data are twofold. The first challenge is human-centered. Traditional funding sources do not appropriate money for engaging alumni, and the LSN schools’ staff and leadership are already managing significant workloads and multiple priorities. Keeping in touch with graduates whose contact information changes frequently can be difficult. That said, the LSN schools have made alumni engagement a priority and engage AmeriCorps and Jesuit Volunteer Corps members to help the schools’ Community Engagement staff make phone calls, send text messages, and plan alumni events.
The second challenge is technical: Typical student information systems aren't built for alumni data collection and, for the most part, the staff team tasked with tracking alumni data are not trained data analysts. They have done their best with Microsoft Excel skills, but maintaining alumni data and occasionally calculating aggregate outcomes or producing infographics has been difficult. Furthermore, if a staff member has a conversation with a graduate at a school event or runs into them at the grocery store, they don’t always remember to enter the data in their spreadsheet once they are back at their desk.

Future Focused Education recently partnered with a developer to help address this second, technical challenge. The Alumni Tracker is a mobile-friendly platform that helps staff easily enter information and access interactive data dashboards. The LSN is piloting the Alumni Tracker in Spring 2020 and is open to customizing it for other schools and programs. For more information, contact justin@futurefocusededucation.org.