



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

The Role of Adult Advocates in Dropout Prevention

Russell W. Rumberger, Ph.D. • January 2009

Topic: Dropout Prevention

Practice: Adult Advocates

Highlights

- The role of the advocate is to serve as a link between the student and the school and between the parents and the school.
- Advocates can positively affect student performance and behavior.
- Advocates may work within the school or outside the school. However, they should be specially trained to work as advocates.

About the Interviewee

Russell W. Rumberger is Professor of Education in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education at the University of California (UC) Santa Barbara and former Director of the UC Linguistic Minority Research Institute (UC LMRI). He received a Ph.D. in Education, an M.A. in Economics from Stanford University, and a B.S. in Electrical Engineering from Carnegie-Mellon University. A faculty member at UCSB since 1987, Professor Rumberger has published widely in several areas of education: education and work, the schooling of disadvantaged students, school effectiveness, and education policy. He has been conducting research on school dropouts for the past 25 years and has written over 40

research papers and essays on the topic. He was a member of the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences panel that produced the Dropout Prevention Practice Guide (2008). He currently serves on two NRC Committees: the Committee on Improved Measurement of High School Dropout and Completion Rates: Expert Guidance on Next Steps for Research and Policy; and the Committee on the Impact of Mobility and Change on the Lives of Young Children, Schools, and Neighborhoods. He also serves on the national advisory committee for the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) project, Gubernatorial Action for Dropout Prevention and Recovery. He is currently directing the California Dropout Research Project, which is producing a series of reports and policy briefs about the dropout problem in California and a state policy agenda to improve California's high school graduation rate (<http://lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts/>).

Full Transcript

My name is Russ Rumberger. I'm a Professor of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I direct the California Dropout Research Project, and I was a member of the IES panel that produced the Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention.

What the research has found is that successful programs with dropouts will find people to play this role of advocate, and essentially the role of the advocate is to serve as a go between the student and the school, but also between the parents and the school. So, they are kind of a middleperson that have the best interests of the child at heart, the interests of the parents at heart, and they advocate on behalf of those parents and the child in matters related to the school. And it could be related to course work, a particular teacher, getting along with peers, whatever the issue may be. And in fact, in some programs, the advocate would really serve in any way that benefits the child. So, in other words, it could be something unrelated to school in any direct way. They could be having problems with relationships; they're adolescents and they're having a problem with their girlfriend or boyfriend or some family member or whatever it would be.

One of the frequent things that we find—or anyone finds if they've talked to students who are having difficulties in school, who are at risk of dropping out, is that they'll say, "There's nobody at school that cares about me. There's nobody at school that even paid attention that I wasn't coming." And so, the whole premise behind having an advocate is having someone who cares deeply and personally about the welfare of that child. So, most students, I think, are going to be very receptive to having somebody who shows an interest in them and has their best interests at heart. And now, not all students will maybe be quite as readily acceptable as others, but I think in my experience with it, most students are going to be very open to the idea of having somebody that genuinely cares about them.

So, having said that, it takes certain kinds of people to play this role. And the more intense the needs are and more intense the relationship is going to be, I think, the more important it is to have a good relationship and establish that sense of trust. So, one of the qualities that we found in doing this program—and it was in

the 1990s in Los Angeles with largely Latino kids. These kids, at least the ones that we dealt with, often had lots of issues and problems in their lives. And it would be, I think, a tendency amongst some adults to be rushed to judgment and maybe even try to change things about them. But to establish a good relationship with a child really requires having this trust, and the foundation of that trust in our experience was really this premise of accepting kids the way they are. And ultimately, of course, you want to improve their performance and maybe even make recommendations about how they can improve their behavior. So, I am not saying that they shouldn't change things that are problematic with them, for example, their social behavior with other peers. But underneath it all is this idea that they are being accepted for who they are.

One of the things that's characteristics of a lot of schools, especially larger schools, is they have a lot of rules, and they feel that the rules are important to impose some order and the like. But one of the things—it gets back to the issue about individual needs of kids—that we found is that because kids' needs do vary a lot, then one of the effective things that schools can do to benefit the kids, especially certain kids, is to provide some flexibility in how they deal with them. And this can range from all kinds of things. But in the extreme case, for example, it was we had a child who just could not get to school at a certain time of the day because of a circumstance I won't go into. But the point was we felt that it was more important for them to be there for four periods out of five than to not be there at all.

Some school systems would have mentor programs where they might have mentors come from the community or from businesses or whatever. Other advocate programs that are at least of the less-intensive type would use existing school people to serve as advocates. So, now, there's a tradeoff between the two approaches. The tradeoff is that the insiders, the inside people, will know the schools; they may have good relationships with their school colleagues. The good thing about outside people is they know—they can be more specially trained; they can engage in more intensive relationships. Potentially they could know more about outside services, for example, maybe because they've come from roles outside the school. But the disadvantage is they have less legitimacy within the school. So, what we found in our program, because they were outsiders, is they had diminished ability to influence other people because they weren't fellow teachers or even the principal or whatever. So, there were cases where they were less effective, or their advocacy was not successful because they were challenging the authority of the school.