



# From Research to Results: Practical Insights for K-12 Leaders

Predicting Dropout Risk: What the Research Says and What  
You Can Do To Keep Your Students in School

# Early Warning Systems: Understanding Key Indicators, Addressing Risks, and Supporting Student Success

Student early warning systems (EWS) are more than just tools for identifying at-risk students—they represent a proactive, data-driven approach to keeping students on the path to graduation. Grounded in research on dropout prevention, EWS leverage key indicators to provide timely, targeted interventions that help students succeed academically and stay engaged in school. But what if you could identify which students need support before issues escalate? What if you could use data to not just predict risks but also prevent them?

## The "ABCs" of Early Warning Systems (EWS)

Extensive research shaped the development of EWS, highlighting four key indicators: attendance, behavior, course performance, and standardized test scores. Known as the "ABCs" (Attendance, Behavior, and Course performance), these metrics offer clear, research-backed insights into whether a student is on track to graduate or at risk of dropping out (Balfanz et al., 2007).

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**From Research to Results** equips K-12 leaders with a deeper understanding of these key indicators and their role in shaping effective intervention strategies. By translating complex research into practical, impactful insights, we empower school leaders to use data in ways that drive meaningful support for students.

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## The Research Behind the "ABCs"

### Attendance

Attendance is one of the most reliable predictors of academic success. Chronic absenteeism, typically defined as missing 10% or more of school days, strongly correlates with lower academic performance and increased dropout rates. Research by Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that 9th-grade attendance is an even stronger predictor of graduation than 8th-grade test scores.

## The Research Behind the "ABCs"

### Behavior

Behavioral indicators, such as disciplinary issues or a lack of engagement in school activities, can signal a deeper risk of disengagement. Students with frequent disciplinary incidents often struggle to reconnect with their learning environments, leading to a higher likelihood of dropping out (Balfanz et al., 2007).

### Course Performance

Academic struggles, particularly in core subjects like math and English, are critical warning signs. Poor course performance or multiple course failures undermine confidence and limit future opportunities. Research shows that course grades in the freshman year are among the strongest predictors of whether a student will graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

### Standardized Test Scores

While often included in EWS, standardized test scores tend to be less predictive than attendance, behavior, and course performance. However, they can provide useful context about a student's academic abilities and areas needing additional support (Balfanz et al., 2007).

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## A Holistic Approach to Risk Identification

The strength of early warning systems lies in their ability to combine these indicators into a nuanced profile of each student. For example, a student with excellent grades but chronic absenteeism may require different interventions than one struggling in multiple areas. This holistic perspective ensures interventions address the root causes of disengagement rather than its symptoms.

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## Turning Research Into Action

- **Proactive Attendance Strategies:** Monitor attendance data closely to identify trends early, engage families to address barriers, and create incentives to encourage consistent attendance.
- **Behavioral Support Systems:** Implement positive behavior interventions, build strong student-teacher relationships, and provide mental health resources to support students showing signs of disengagement.
- **Academic Interventions:** Use data to flag students falling behind in core courses, and provide targeted tutoring, credit recovery programs, or personalized academic supports to get them back on track.
- **Integrated Data Systems:** Ensure that attendance, behavior, course performance, and test score data are centralized and easily accessible for timely decision-making.

## A Data-Driven Path Forward

EWS are invaluable tools for identifying risks and implementing timely interventions, but their true power lies in their ability to transform complex data into meaningful actions. By focusing on the "ABCs" of student success, educational leaders can build systems that not only predict risks but also provide the tools to address them effectively. When students receive the right support at the right time, they stay engaged, achieve more, and reach their full potential.

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## References

1. Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q. (2007). What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago public high schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and attendance in the freshman year. Consortium on Chicago School Research.
2. Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & Mac Iver, D. J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223–235.