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Is Your School Up To PAR?

State Standards
Completion Rates
Parental Participation
Academic Achievement
School Improvement



NATIONAL
DROPOUT PREVENTION
CENTER

“All children deserve a high-quality education that provides them the opportunity to learn and succeed in a safe and caring environment. For more than 15 years, the National Dropout Prevention Center has worked to support and enhance the continuous improvement of public education systems. Our approaches are research-based and grounded in our conviction that schools must plan creatively and systematically to achieve the goal of high-quality education for every child.”

Jay Smink
Executive Director
National Dropout Prevention Center

Important Questions for Responsible School Leaders

- Are your students' achievement scores meeting state standards?
- Are your high school completion rates satisfactory?
- Are you satisfied with the parental participation at your school?
- Do you have an academic achievement plan for low-performing students?
- Do your classroom teaching strategies address the academic needs of low-performing students?
- Do you have a research-based process in place to guide your school improvement projects?

If you answered no to **any** of the above questions, then it is time for you to consider “*getting up to PAR*” in your school or district! The Program Assessment and Review (**PAR**) process, developed by the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC), has been successfully used in numerous schools and communities across the nation. PAR is available for your district to use in guiding local school improvement efforts to increase student achievement scores and high school completion rates.

We invite you to learn more about the benefits of this research-based process and how your district and school can meet its desired student achievement levels and the district graduation goals by being “up to **PAR**.”

An Introduction to PAR

PAR is a professional service provided by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N). Since 1986, the NDPC/N has been working to improve opportunities for all young people to fully develop the academic, social, behavioral, work and life skills needed to graduate from high school and lead productive lives. The NDPC/N developed the PAR process to provide a guide for continuous school improvement with an emphasis on improving student academic achievement and increasing the graduation rate.

The purpose of the PAR process is to provide research-based strategies and solutions along with professional assistance to local schools. The goal is to help develop each school's capacity for self-directed, continuous school improvement. With the guidance of experienced national consultants, the PAR process provides schools and communities with an opportunity to study themselves and to make decisions based on local goals, resources and conditions. The PAR process involves the analysis of local data, includes site interviews and observations, and is managed by local action teams consisting of representatives from the local school and community.

The review includes an analysis of data associated with student demographics; student academic performance, attendance and discipline; and administrative policies, school curriculum and

school climate. In addition, on-site observations and interviews review school priorities, classroom practices, school resources, community partnerships, parent involvement and the availability of educational options for youth in at-risk situations. The ultimate consumer of the data and information collected by PAR is the local action team (LAT), which will use the information to develop action plans for the school and community with a goal of increasing the school's dropout prevention capacity.

Research Base of the PAR Process

The research base for the PAR process consists of five major themes that guide the review of school data, general observations, interviews and group sessions conducted during the on-site visit. These themes reflect the school reform literature and the proven policies and practices found in successful schools throughout the nation.

Theme 1: District and School Philosophy, Values and a Spirit of School Improvement

The district and school staff, business and organization partners, and community stakeholders work collaboratively to support a clear philosophy, mission, goals and set of values.

- The district and school have a written statement of beliefs and a mission that support a learning philosophy for all students and a collaborative approach to involving all stakeholders in the community.
- The school has an active school improvement council or committee(s) with diverse representatives from the school and community organizations.
- The district and school have clearly defined policies and procedures, particularly attendance, truancy, retention and discipline, to address the diverse needs of all students.



- The school provides resources and financial support for continuous school improvement activities directed toward obtaining improved student achievement.

Theme 2: Leadership, Staff Resources and Professional Development Opportunities

The school leaders, in collaboration with staff and other community stakeholders, provide direction for increasing student achievement through continuous school improvement, which includes professional development opportunities for all staff.

- The school leaders provide vision and direction to school staff, parents and community groups to support student learning and involvement in the community.
- The school leaders provide a qualified and competent staff with adequate resources and support services to enhance learning for all students.
- The school leaders provide a broad-based staff including teachers, librarians, counselors, psychologists, social workers, media specialists, health-related personnel, teacher aides and other staff necessary to promote student learning.
- The district and school provide adequate time and resources for professional and personal growth opportunities geared toward improving student learning.

Theme 3: Curriculum, Instructional Strategies and Assessment

Curriculum guides, support materials, instructional strategies, and assessment procedures and activities are aligned to support student learning.

- The curriculum and instructional strategies are aligned with state frameworks and standards, the goals of the school and student learning.
- The curriculum provides opportunities for learning outside the school by using resources within the local community and beyond.
- The curriculum provides opportunities for students to use the newest technologies and higher-order thinking skills in their learning process.
- The school provides for comprehensive and continuous assessment of student learning and, as needed, makes curriculum modifications and changes in the instructional strategies required for some students.

Theme 4: School, Family and Community Support Structure for Learning

The district and school have a comprehensive school and community-based support structure related to student learning for all students and their families.

- The school provides for all students a student-centered guidance program that addresses learning and health-related issues, and includes family or personal counseling, referrals or recommendations for case-management assistance by social service agencies.
- The school policies and practices provide an adult adviser and/or assistance team to support those students in greatest need of academic assistance.
- Opportunities for learning in school-based activities include student access to extracurricular programs.
- The school encourages and provides varied opportunities for family and parental participation in all aspects of school activities and in the student learning and assessment process.
- Involvement of community partners is encouraged for decision making, school improvement and provision of student workplace experiences.

Theme 5: Adequate Facilities, Current Technologies, and Safe and Orderly Environments

School facilities, including the availability and use of the latest learning technologies, are adequate and located on a campus that is safe and managed as a caring and violence-free environment.

- The school campus and facilities provide a healthy learning environment that is conducive to teaching and student learning.



- The facilities are adequate to include varied instructional strategies such as the use of the Internet and other technologies.
- School policies and discipline procedures reflect the philosophy of the school and the importance of maintaining respect for students in a safe and orderly environment.
- The community views the school campus and facilities as assets and as a center for learning for both the students and the community at large.



Phases of PAR

PAR procedures and time frames are designed to provide minimum disruption to normal school or program activities while allowing adequate time to analyze data; observe operating programs and classroom practices; and interview selected key staff, related support personnel and selected community partners. PAR consists of seven phases: 1. Preparation, 2. Data Review and Analysis, 3. School Site Visit, 4. Review and Analysis of the School Visit Data, 5. Report and Discussion, 6. Action Planning and 7. Implementing the Action Plan.

Phase 1: Preparation

The Preparation phase allows the local district and school to make a firm commitment to participate in the PAR process and to establish a structure for involvement. The tasks include the following:

- The district and school will make a commitment to engage in the PAR process.
- The district and school will establish a local action team and identify other organizations and agencies to provide support to the LATs.
- The LAT will select a chairperson.
- The LAT will gather requested information and data to forward to the NDPC at Clemson.
- The LAT will administer one of the following school climate measures to students, parents and teachers: the School Climate Survey (National Study of School Evaluation), the Student Success Profile (School of Social Work, UNC Chapel Hill) or other instruments used locally.

Phase 2: Data Review and Analysis

During the Data Review and Analysis phase, all pertinent information is compiled and the preliminary review process begins. The responsibilities in this phase include the following:

- LAT members will conduct a general review of the existing school data and forward pertinent data to NDPC such as achievement scores; attendance; retention; dropout statistics; and student, staff and community demographics.
- The LAT will send results of the School Climate Surveys to NDPC.
- PAR facilitators will conduct a thorough review and analysis of school data forwarded from the LAT and the results of the School Climate Surveys.

Phase 3: The School Site Visit

A major component of the PAR process is the external review team's on-site visit, which is designed to study the current policies and practices in the school, review various school and community conditions that support student performance, gather opinions and perspectives from numerous professionals and school partners, and gain a sense of the school climate for continuous school improvement.

The purpose of the school site visit is to build upon the analysis of the information provided by each school and to seek additional insight from school and community interviews and observations. The activities include the following:

- The PAR facilitation team will visit the school and correlate observations with previous data analyses.
- The PAR team will make general observations about the facilities, space allocations and how the dropout prevention program relates to other programs in the school district or community.
- Observations will focus on administrative practices, classroom management, curriculum materials, teaching strategies, counseling and other support services.

- Individual interviews and panel discussions will be scheduled with selected local school staff, parents, students and/or other related agency representatives.
- PAR facilitators will participate in an exit discussion of observations.

Phase 4: Review and Analysis of the School Visit Data

The review of local documents and the on-site visit provide information for a detailed narrative report that combines the analyses made from the previously reviewed school-based data, observations about organizational and instructional effectiveness of the school, and general observations gained from interviews and focus-group sessions conducted during the visit. The report will include commendations as well as the identification of program areas that appear to be least productive or in conflict with the current research. A list of recommendations will be included for review and consideration by the local action team.

This phase allows the PAR team to integrate local information from multiple sources into a coherent report reflecting current conditions, policies and practices in the school. The tasks include the following:

- The PAR team will combine and analyze the information recorded during the school visit.
- The PAR team will develop conclusions and recommendations based on the review of the data sent by the LAT, the results of the School Climate Surveys, and the school visit observations and interviews.

- The PAR team leader will compile a report for the LAT. The report will include observations about specific strengths and weaknesses as well as program suggestions and recommendations.

Phase 5: Report and Discussion

The Report and Discussion phase provides a forum for discussing the PAR report's observations and recommendations. The activities in this phase include the following:

- The PAR team leader will meet with the LAT to present the report and discuss the findings.
- The LAT and the PAR team leader will discuss ways to identify strategies that address the needs of the school and the students.

Phase 6: Action Planning

The purpose of the Action Planning phase is to allow the LAT to explore new or revised policies and/or practices and to make decisions on implementing new programs. This phase includes the following activities:

- The LAT members, the PAR team leader and representatives from other support groups will identify successful program sites where local team members might review model policies and practices.
- The PAR team leader and the LAT will discuss any new or revised program recommendations, set priorities for change and develop an action plan.

Phase 7: Implementing the Action Plan

In this final phase of the PAR process the LAT serves as the guiding force to ensure the successful implementation of the action plan, acts as the motivating force to maintain enthusiasm for accomplishing the plan and serves as the monitoring force to ensure that the plan is producing the desired results.

- The LAT will consult with the PAR team leader to identify appropriate technical assistance, professional development and possible consultants who can provide both.
- The LAT will provide leadership for evaluating program efforts and for planning professional development and continuous program improvement.



Success Stories

The following are examples of how other schools and communities have successfully used PAR.

In the **Henderson County School District (NC)**, the superintendent used the PAR report as a starting point for school and community discussions that led to new districtwide attendance policies and new approaches for working with parents in each of the district's schools.

Spartanburg School District Five (SC) used PAR to study the district's plan for working with students in at-risk situations. PAR helped the district implement a comprehensive plan for transition from middle school to high school. Special attention was placed on eighth-grade students who have low-performance records.

Faced with an extremely high dropout rate in the **Hart County School District (GA)**, a community-based organization, **Hart Partners**, used PAR to find solutions. As a result of PAR recommendations, a school-community dropout committee was formed, and school improvement plans were developed for each school in the district. Emphasis was placed on reading programs for low-performing students.

The **Shoreline Community College in Seattle (WA)** operates a Career Education Options program, which is a credit recovery program for students ages 16 to 21 who have been expelled or suspended or who have dropped out of high school. The college used PAR to guide the restructuring of staff development and improvements in the instructional environment and teaching strategies.

PAR helped the **Dallas Independent School District (TX)** assess districtwide alternative education programs and the alternative campus learning centers in selected high schools. As a result, modifications were made in instructional strategies and in the administrative structure of the campus learning centers. In addition, the local Chamber of Commerce increased its involvement in dropout prevention programs.

When the **Stephens County School District (GA)** wanted an independent assessment of the countywide dropout prevention programs for expelled and adjudicated students, they chose the National Dropout Prevention Center and PAR. The technical assistance offered by the center provided innovative modifications for those programs, which are coordinated by the CrossRoads Alternative School in conjunction with the juvenile court system and the Stephens County Department of Juvenile Justice.

While seeking help for the state's lowest-performing middle schools, the **New York State Education Department** created the New York Dropout Prevention Initiative. The initiative is using PAR for an independent assessment of 13 low-performing middle schools that have high percentages of students in at-risk situations. The PAR assessments are comprehensive, and they are providing guidance to school and community leaders to improve student academic achievement levels and to increase high school graduation rates.

We Can Help

For almost two decades, the NDPC at Clemson University has provided customized research, assessment and evaluation services to state departments of education, school districts and community-based organizations across the nation. The center staff and teams of nationally recognized consultants are prepared to help your local schools and community enhance the



achievement levels of all students. We are well prepared to assist you in addressing the many dimensions of school reform and continuous school improvement, including the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Our work with others includes the following:

- Evaluating the success of school reform initiatives and the effectiveness of school and student accountability measures;
- Assessing the effectiveness of educational programs and dropout prevention projects designed to keep students in school and to improve student achievement; and
- Evaluating intervention strategies used to improve student retention and academic performance in low-achieving schools.

Please call us to discuss your needs and how we can tailor our PAR process to meet your goals. For more information about the center please visit our Web site at www.dropoutprevention.org.