Most dropouts are remarkably persistent in their quest for more education. Nationally, nearly 60 percent eventually earn a high school credential, and many more try. Texas invests significant resources to assist schools and programs in recovering dropouts through a variety of policies. These include HB 1127 LEGISLATION to award diplomas to youth through age 25, the OPTIONAL FLEXIBLE SCHOOL DAY PROGRAM, and the TEXAS DROPOUT RECOVERY PROGRAM, among others. Even so, it can be challenging for schools and districts to make meaningful contact with young people who have disconnected from the educational system. Youth who are disengaged from high school—and who may have entered and left multiple education programs since the first time they dropped out—can be hard to convince that the next opportunity will be better than the one before.

HERE ARE SOME STRATEGIES FOR REACHING THE OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH IN YOUR COMMUNITY.

> **Use data to identify and target dropouts.** Work with local school districts to generate a list of students who have dropped out or who have persistent unexcused absences from school. Based on their age and distance from graduation, determine which students fit in your target population.

> **Identify a staff person to lead your efforts to recruit dropouts, and allocate enough time for this task.** Staff the work of recruiting with a person designated to oversee all the pieces of outreach, from developing materials to contacting referral sources.

> **Take a campaign approach.** Reaching out to disconnected youth requires an “all hands on deck” approach: enlisting a corps of people who can find and engage young people, and using specific numeric targets within a set time frame to motivate everyone. Set a recruiting goal, and then organize your staff to stay focused on it.

> **Personalize outreach to young people.** Young people, like everyone else, respond to personal contact better than to general appeals. Reach out to students individually through home visits or phone calls.

> **Create a network of recruiting partners.** Community partners can be vital to recruiting. A high dropout rate creates an economic strain that affects the whole community. Recruit educational, civic, and spiritual leaders to support you. For example, a minister might recommend your program in her or his weekly sermon. If a dropout doesn’t respond to a home visit by one of your staff, a former coach or a city council member might follow up.

> **Use technology and social networking.** Many of today’s young adults access information through Facebook, Twitter, and similar sites. Create a Facebook page for your program and “friend” youth you wish to recruit. Use videos to show engaging snippets of classroom life. Consider using texting to stimulate a dialogue.

> **Deliver the right messages.** Create a small number of key messages that will attract youth to your program, and then deliver those messages consistently. For example: Encourage students to participate by emphasizing that it is neither too late nor too difficult to continue their education. Stress the importance of postsecondary credentials for earning enough to support a family. Show the link between college and the careers that appeal to young adults. Clearly describe how your program’s design produces results. Show how the population it targets in terms of age, credits, and skill levels matches that of the person being recruited. Emphasize your program’s results.

> **Deliver messages in the right way.** Carefully consider the best means of delivering your message in your community. Ask other students to critique your recruiting materials. Ensure your messages are visible where young people congregate. The local mall might be a better place for recruiting than a teen center if you learn only younger youth go to the teen center. More young people may listen to the DJ on a popular local radio station than watch public access television.
Immediately engage prospective students. If a student must wait several weeks to get connected to your program, they may feel frustrated and easily get distracted by life. Create opportunities for students to enroll as frequently as you can. If your program enrolls students only on a few specific dates, find ways to get interested students informally engaged. Provide exercises they can do off campus to develop their skills, and/or make occasional phone calls to keep in touch.

Know what other programs serve dropouts and build reciprocal referral networks. When making contact with potential students, it helps to know the full range of options for dropouts in your community. If your program isn’t right for a particular person, recommend a program that might be a better fit. Developing relationships with the other schools and service providers in your community will help connect youth to the best programs for each and ensure that no one falls through the cracks again.

RECRUITING SELF-ASSESSMENT: GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR DROPOUT RECOVERY SITES

How will your program identify students who have dropped out? How can you obtain a list of students who have dropped out or been consistently absent from school?

How does your program conduct tell the community about options for reentry? How often is this done, and at what points in the year? Can interested students get immediately connected to your program in some way, or do they have to wait?

How do you target your outreach? Do you go to former students’ homes and/or reach them by phone or online? Do you target places where youth might congregate, such as malls, youth centers, or places of worship? Are students referred to you by area schools? By a district or regional reengagement center?

What staff members are responsible for recruiting youth who may be seeking to continue their education? Who is responsible for reaching out to their families? What additional resources do recruiting staff need? What other community stakeholders are involved in recruiting?


What steps might your program take to improve its outreach?