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DATE 08/31/2021

SCHOOLS CAN STOP SUMMER MELT:

Lessons Learned from the
Wisconsin Text Steps Project

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Acknowledgments: NCAN is grateful to Ascendium Education Group, whose generous support made this report possible.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Text Steps was a project piloted by Ascendium Education Group in 2015 and expanded to 13 school districts in Wisconsin between 2018 and 2020. Its goal was to combat summer melt through a texting program. Summer melt, in which college-intending high school students are unable to enroll in the fall for any number of reasons, is a well-documented phenomenon in the college access space.¹ Although summer melt is familiar to many community-based organizations working with aspiring college students, less prevalent are summer melt prevention programs operating from within K-12 districts and schools.

This brief considers the experiences of district- and school-level practitioners in planning and implementing a summer melt intervention. Their perspectives are specific to the Text Steps project, but there are broader lessons for other practitioners about advisable approaches and avoidable pitfalls while pursuing similar efforts elsewhere.

Survey data from, and individual interviews with, practitioners in districts and schools inform this brief, as do project plans and materials received from the districts themselves. These data and materials were collected in spring 2021. To promote the importance of practitioner voice, this brief leans heavily on respondents' own words, which NCAN has lightly edited for length and clarity.

The key lessons practitioners can learn from this brief include:

- Successful summer melt interventions require the buy-in of both district and school leadership and frontline staff members.
- Students' postsecondary outcomes data are key for understanding an intervention's success. But working with these data may be unfamiliar for some practitioners, and prior planning to develop a data collection and analysis plan is important.
- The conditions that lead to summer melt will start before the summer, and the activities that will prevent it should take place year-round.
- Although some elements of summer melt interventions are near-universal, districts and schools should adapt their program to their specific context, criteria, and culture.

Given recent declines in fall postsecondary enrollment, and especially the inequitable outcomes of students based on family income, race, and ethnicity², it is important for the K-12 sector to understand how it can best help students bridge the gap between high school graduation and postsecondary matriculation.

¹ https://www.ncan.org/general/custom.asp?page=summer_melt_resources

² https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021_HS BenchmarksCovidReport.pdf

For more information on summer melt, consult the following research and resources:

- [NCAN's Summer Melt Resources](#)
- [NCAN's Summer Melt Toolkit](#)
- [Strategic Data Project: Summer Melt Tools](#)
- Castleman, B.L. & Page, L.C. (2014). *Summer Melt: Supporting Low-Income Students through the Transition to College*. Harvard Education Press.
- [Polon, I., Campbell, V., & Ahn, G. \(2019\). "Combatting Summer Melt: The Impact of the 2017 College Bridge for All Program on Fall Matriculation."](#)
- [Education Northwest: "What the Research Says About Summer Melt."](#)

PROJECT SCOPE AND OUTCOMES

The Text Steps project provided startup funding and other support to 13 school districts (see inset) to launch text “nudging” programs designed to help students meet critical deadlines and complete their final steps on the path to college.

The Text Steps Districts

- Adams-Friendship Area School District
- Unified School District of Antigo
- School District of Fort Atkinson
- Green Bay Area Public School District
- School District of La Crosse
- School District of Monroe
- Racine Unified School District
- Sheboygan Area School District
- St. Francis School District
- School District of South Milwaukee
- Watertown Unified School District
- West Allis-West Milwaukee
- Wisconsin Rapids Public Schools

After spending several months preparing for launch, onboarding onto and learning a text messaging platform, and recruiting students, districts started sending messages in June 2019. Counselors in each district sent participating students about one text per week. Students responded with questions, and conversations with counselors could ensue through the text messaging platform as students worked through final preparations for college.

The Madison Metropolitan School District worked with Ascendium to pilot the Text Steps concept in 2015, and that district has since continued the texting project on its own. The pilot helped Ascendium learn not only about the texting platform but also the system changes and school resources necessary to implement a texting program, including staffing and training protocols. Ascendium provided ongoing technical assistance to each district based on knowledge gained through the pilot project, and districts gained access to a learning community with which to share best practices and strategies for overcoming challenges.

School districts measured impacts to their students' postsecondary outcomes through the National Student Clearinghouse's [StudentTracker for High](#)

[Schools](#) service. Ascendium Education Group compared the postsecondary outcomes of students from the high school classes of 2018 (the baseline) and 2019 (who received the Text Steps intervention).

The average fall enrollment rate across the 13 districts was 54% for the class of 2019, up 3 percentage points from the class of 2018. Students of color and economically disadvantaged students who enrolled in the Text Steps project saw sizable enrollment rate increases. Participating districts' students of color from the class of 2018 had a 40% fall enrollment rate, and those from the class of 2019 had a 45% enrollment rate, but 65% of students of color participating in Text Steps enrolled in fall 2019. Economically disadvantaged Text Steps participants had a 64% fall enrollment rate compared to 37% for the class of 2018 and 39% for the class of 2019.

The results above suggest that the K-12 sector can implement summer melt prevention programming that can substantially affect students' postsecondary enrollment outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

There are many critical tasks a high school senior will have to complete as they transition to college. When a high school student is from a low-income background or is the first in their family to attend college, these unfamiliar tasks often require extra support. Some of these tasks include graduating seniors paying initial deposits to secure their place in college, signing up for their first college orientation often as a prerequisite to enroll in classes, and finalizing financial aid packages. Research has shown that as many as 40% of high school graduates accepted into college fail to enroll due to an inability to complete these summer tasks. This phenomenon is known as summer melt.



“The Ascendium Grant really helped us understand that our service throughout the summer really can help our students make it to the finish line. [That] is really what we want to help them do, not just get them to cross the graduation stage, but to the finish line of whatever their self-defined academic and career plan is.”



**JOSEPH O'BRIEN, SCHOOL COUNSELOR,
SHEBOYGAN AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT**

The idea for the Text Steps project was piloted with the Madison Metropolitan School District and Ascendium Education Group in 2015. The full Text Steps project began in fall 2018 when Ascendium Education Group launched a \$630,000 grant project with 13 Wisconsin public school districts with the goal of combating summer melt by using text messaging, or “nudging,” to help high school counselors stay connected with students.

From NCAN’s survey and interviews with counselors for this report, there are many lessons to be shared as to the challenges and opportunities that come with a texting program and how such a program can be used to combat summer melt. Counselors shared the challenges they encountered as well as recommendations they have for others who would like to implement a summer melt intervention like Text Steps in their own districts. These education leaders’ shared knowledge should be used as best practices for their peers to consider for better supporting students from low-income backgrounds to reach their academic goals beyond high school.

During pre-pandemic times, the challenges to assisting high school seniors in completing pre-college tasks over the summer proved to be difficult enough. But as these 13 Wisconsin public school districts successfully demonstrate, pandemic or not, there are many ways to combat the phenomenon of summer melt by nudging students into college. All involved in the Text Steps project understood that it is important to reach students in a way they are familiar with and how text messaging serves that purpose.



“It’s just a gentle nudge; it’s a gentle reminder, and sometimes it’s the kids needing to be reminded about what they want for themselves.”

**JILL SAVICK, SCHOOL COUNSELOR,
ST. FRANCIS SCHOOL DISTRICT**

The work in assisting high school seniors in reaching their academic goals cannot end with high school graduation, as many of these education leaders have pointed out. Educators must continue to think beyond the high school diploma, especially when it comes to students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation students in ensuring they have the support to reach their academic goals of attending and completing college.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR SUMMER MELT PROGRAMMING

Counselors shared several challenges they experienced during the Text Steps project, and these challenges fell into several different buckets with varying proposed solutions.

First, counselors shared that support is needed from all levels of a district, including staff buy-in for the project. Counselors thought having more knowledge of the initiative and its purpose would increase buy-in from school staff and administrators.

Additionally, all staff members need to understand that summer melt prevention is important work to be done throughout the entire school year, not just the summer.

Other issues counselors shared ranged from compensating counselors for the summer to assisting counselors in gathering the data used for the project's success. Signing students up for the program was another area that counselors described as challenging.

This brief considers each of these challenges in turn and proposes solutions for others engaging in summer melt interventions.

Securing District Support and Ensuring Staff Buy-In

Some counselors noted that their district administration was more hands-off when it came to the summer melt initiative. Although some counselors expressed having very supportive administrators and colleagues, others shared the challenge of having to navigate unfamiliar processes and feeling alone while doing so.

Although all counselors expressed the belief that the project was essential, attitudes toward continuing the project varied depending on support from counselors, administrators, and colleagues.

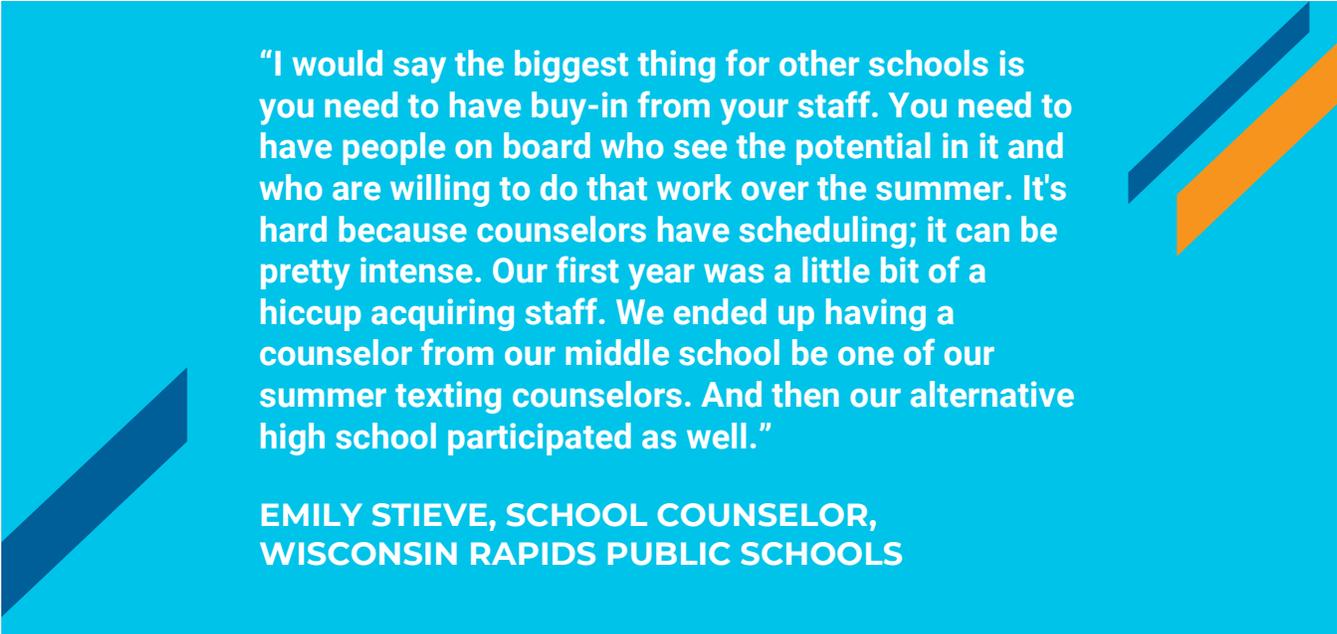
Staff buy-in to the Text Steps project was critical to the counselors because they learned if other staff and administrators knew from the beginning the importance of such a program, perhaps they would be more supportive of their efforts or want to be more involved.

Joseph O'Brien, a school counselor for the Sheboygan Area School District noted how staff buy-in shapes the success of an implementation:

"We also need a great staff that buys into the program. Because it is easy in the summer as a school counselor that might not be ... on schedule necessarily to be out and maybe not necessarily be engaged with that texting. But our students *are* texting, which means they are expecting a pretty immediate response.

We have had a great team the last couple summers. We will have a great team this upcoming summer as well that really does understand that our students still seek our guidance and that we're there to support them in a timely manner. I think that having a good solid team there ... really makes for a successful program and then the administration at the district level, they know they needed to buy into this from the get-go."

Emily Stieve, school counselor at Wisconsin Rapids Public Schools, echoed O'Brien's sentiment as she shared that in her school and district, she encountered challenges with recruiting counselors:



"I would say the biggest thing for other schools is you need to have buy-in from your staff. You need to have people on board who see the potential in it and who are willing to do that work over the summer. It's hard because counselors have scheduling; it can be pretty intense. Our first year was a little bit of a hiccup acquiring staff. We ended up having a counselor from our middle school be one of our summer texting counselors. And then our alternative high school participated as well."

**EMILY STIEVE, SCHOOL COUNSELOR,
WISCONSIN RAPIDS PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

For many counselors, the Text Steps project helped them better understand their students, and they felt that administrators should encourage that level of understanding for everyone working to ensure student success beyond high school. An issue at some schools and districts was that many responsibilities for the project's success fell on one person.

Counselors shared additional tips that would increase staff buy-in:

- Have a consistent staff running the program.
- Realize that Text Steps is a year-long program, not just a summer program, and the work for it to be successful needs to be done throughout the school year.
- Commit to running the summer melt initiative for more than two years, and ideally five, to see positive results on a larger scale.

- Recognize that support for the project starts at the school district level, from the school board to the district administrators, as well as to the school site staff, so that those directly running the program are best equipped for success.

Understand Which Data Are Important and How to Obtain and Analyze Them

Obtaining student data and the support to do so varied from district to district in the Text Steps project. While some counselors were able to access data more quickly, some felt unsupported. As a requirement of the grant, the districts had to pull and report student data to the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) in order to show how the texting-based summer melt intervention was faring in supporting students to reach their enrollment goals. The responsibility of pulling data is one that in some districts would be handled by a dedicated data person.

The NSC is a nonprofit organization that provides educational reporting, data, verification, and research services to better understand students' postsecondary pathways.

Working with the district to gain data-related technical assistance is essential for making use of the National Student Clearinghouse. Counselors often do not have the expertise or skill set to gather and configure the required data. If there is little to no data support from district staff, then counselors will be spending time on data gathering. As Julie Slaats-Rowe, a school counselor at the School District of La Crosse, stated, "Working with our district, making sure that I could get that information was critical, and I was fortunate because ... our district office could help me. ... She was very, very helpful putting together that data that we needed."

Katie Utphall, a school counselor at the School District of Fort Atkinson, shared that she appreciated her district's designated data staff member because she didn't have access to the data herself. "I know sometimes our data person here gets slammed, ... but remember that they need time as well to get things done."

Conversely, Kelly Pokrzywa, school counselor at the Watertown Unified School District, said she was responsible for finding student data and information and reporting it to the NSC. She noted, "A big part of it is turnover. Finding the data was interesting for me to really wrap my brain around, but it felt like [it took] the first two years to fully understand the type of data we post. We do not have a data person in our district. ... I really had to understand that myself and dig into that myself."

These interviews reveal that it is important to communicate the need for pulling student data in advance. Finding out whether a district or school has a data support person and getting them on board with the project from day one helps as well.

Understand Where Summer Melt Programming Fits Into the Calendar

Those interviewed noted it could have been helpful to begin the initiative earlier in the school year. Some counselors even suggested that summer texting could be beneficial for juniors who are preparing for college as they transition to senior year.

Laura Siemering, school counselor at the Green Bay Area Public School District, said starting earlier in the year gives time to gather data, write job descriptions for counselors by working with the district's human resource department, as well as having more time to get students to sign up for the program. A list outlining all the tasks that need to be done for the program would also be helpful. Siemering said: "Depending on the [district's] size, you need to know who the players are at the district level. ... What are your contingencies for the legality purposes? What are some of the rules for actually giving a survey to students and getting their cell phone number? You need to figure out [who] your data person is. ... Put together a timeline of steps to take [for] when you're implementing the project."

Counselors noted that the end of the year at a high school is packed with activities, and trying to organize a summer texting intervention can feel a little overwhelming. Utphall shared, "As a high school counselor, the end of the year gets pretty crazy ... and we weren't really guided to start creating our text messages until April, May. And then all of a sudden it felt like this is a lot to do at the same time that we're doing all these other things at the end of the year."

The timing of the senior exit survey was also important. Stieve shared, "The first year we did the senior exit survey in the spring, and we found that it was really hard to get responses from seniors because there's so much going on and some of them are checking out already. It was a little bit more difficult in our first year when we had 67 students total sign up" The second year they moved the senior exit survey to January, which was fortuitous given the COVID-19 pandemic forcing schools to close. Moving the survey back "worked out really well for us because we had time to promote the program. Then we gave them time to fill out the survey, and that all happened before the school shut down." Ultimately, collecting the surveys earlier in the year more than doubled the number of students signed up for summer texting in Stieve's district in the second year of Text Steps.

For other counselors, starting earlier would not just lead to students opting in earlier but could also help counselors begin nudging students to complete other college-related tasks during the school year. Joseph O'Brien explained, "We've wanted to do it all year round, if we could, because as early as the start of the school year, they should be applying to colleges, filling out the FAFSA... They should be working on scholarships, and we realize that texting them is going to get this information to them that much quicker."

Think Carefully About Opt-In and Opt-Out Policies

Some counselors and administrators shared that involving students in a text messaging program on an opt-out basis is preferable to having students opt in. "Allowing them to opt in, they might not see the advantages of this program, or they might think that everything's going to go fine just because they're not good at asking for help. ... If I were to do it again, I would make it a mandatory thing for us," one principal shared. "I would like to remove any barriers to kids signing up for [a text messaging platform]."

Making the Project Your Own

Stieve saw the importance of making the Text Steps project her own at the school. Stieve then worked with the advanced marketing class at the high school to develop a marketing campaign for Text Steps and rebranded the Text Steps project to Raider Aid, named after their high school mascot. She explains, "Marketing it that way, it was kind of more fun and more appealing for our students. And then we worked with some students to figure out what could we do to kind of help initiate participation in this. And they're like, 'Well, do you have prizes?'"

Jill Savick, school counselor at the St. Francis School District, shared that making the project her own was more personal in terms of relationship building with the students to help them see she cared about them. Like other counselors, Savick recruited students in person, visiting English classrooms multiple times in the fall to get students to sign up for Text Steps.

Carolynn Lee, program officer at Ascendium Education Group, stated that when schools made the project their own, it demonstrated their commitment at the highest level to ensuring the program's success. "You're not going to create a new personalized brand for something that you're only going to do for a year or two. I think it's emblematic of districtwide support for the work, which was a very central goal of ours from the beginning is to have these be efforts that were supported at the district level, not just at individual high schools."

CONCLUSION

The counselors and educational leaders who implemented this program improved student success by using nudging to encourage students to complete essential tasks in the summer to ensure a more seamless transition from high school to college. The program was particularly impactful for students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation college students. Research shows that as many as 40% of high school graduates accepted into college fail to enroll due to an inability to complete these sometimes confusing summer tasks.

For Ascendium Education Group, these efforts are part of a long-standing commitment to improving access to higher education for students from low-income backgrounds. Program officer Carolynn Lee stated efforts such as these are challenging but offer valuable lessons for what it takes to successfully implement a summer melt campaign.

Counselors involved in the project saw challenges ranging from generating district support or buy-in to having trouble accessing postsecondary outcomes data to effectively recruiting student participation. But many counselors were planning to continue the program or are currently working on finding funding to ensure the program's long-term success. Part of ensuring that success is also putting a leader of these efforts in place who is committed to the program. As one respondent noted:

“The person in charge should have a long-term commitment to the district. They should also be interested in data, especially in districts where they don't have a dedicated person already looking at that information. Having well-written senior surveys will greatly impact your knowledge about what types of services you should offer. It takes a couple of years for students to catch on to the benefits and want to sign up.”

Implementing a summer melt intervention is a long-term commitment and a sensible one to make according to many of these counselors because it helped many students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation college students.

For a text messaging program to be successful, it needs buy-in across the district, from the school board to the principals to those working directly with students and especially those who will be recruiting students and those texting the students in the summer. Summer melt programming needs to be seen as a year-long program to be successful and not simply as a summer program.

There are many necessary tasks for ensuring a project like Text Steps is successful, and if school districts take an all-hands-on-deck approach, they will see an impact on combating summer melt. As Joseph O'Brien shared, students need that helping hand from a trusted individual in the transition from high school to college: “We're their trusted adults right now. We have been their trusted adults for the last four years. So, when they know they're reaching out to Mr. O'Brien, they know that I'm going to respond to them in a timely manner and that I'm going to give them the most accurate information I possibly can. They don't necessarily have that trusted adult at [a college or university] yet.”

High school counselors, teachers, administrators can be that one person who prevents students from delaying or deferring their college dreams. As Jill Savick stated, her commitment, like many of the counselors engaged in summer melt programming, already extended beyond high school graduation. But the texting programs make maintaining contact that much easier. “We do have a fair number of students that will reach out even after they've graduated,” Savick said, “and I will say, ‘If this isn't the time now ... I'm here for you. So, if you need help on an application, please reach out.’”

As the Text Steps project in Wisconsin shows, working together from the district level down to those implementing a summer texting program throughout the entire year will help combat summer melt. Many involved, like Savick, school counselor in the St. Francis School District, believe that the sooner students start tasks related to enrolling in college, the more their chances for actually enrolling after high school graduation improve. That is why counselors like her remain dedicated to ensuring the program continues. “I think it's a program with a lot of heart. I'm very dedicated to seeing this through because [it's] a big deal to move kids, to support them, to go to college.” Districts that wish to implement a texting program should consider their best available options and use these lessons to ensure that the program and, most importantly, the students impacted will be set up for success at every step they take beyond high school graduation.