Appendix A
Research-Based Strategies for Dropout Prevention and Re-Engagement

**Alternative Pathways:** For at-risk students, alternative education pathways have the potential to offer a flexible, smaller and more personalized environment in which to learn and form strong connections with school staff and peers.

Existing alternative education programs/schools pathways in Massachusetts include those targeted to very specific populations (e.g., parenting teens, expelled students, students retained in grade nine), as well as more general enrollment that includes a broader base of students that have risk factors for dropping out of school. They may be established within the traditional school during the regular school day; within the traditional school after the regular school day; or in a separate, off-site location – including at community-based organizations. They may offer traditional credit accumulation (Carnegie unit) or competency-based education as well as online or teacher-taught credit recovery/acceleration. Districts may also elect to create a separate official school devoted to alternative education.

Program implementation funds will provide support and infrastructure to increase the number of alternative pathway options available to students who need to reconnect to a pathway to graduation. Specifically, there is a need for increased alternative education pathways for students who are: facing school expulsion or long-term suspension; homeless, migrant and immigrant; “over-aged and under-credited” compared with their peers; expectant and parenting teens; and/or at-risk as identified through EWIS or local knowledge/data.

**Adult Advocates for Student Support:** Research tells us that every student needs a caring adult to connect with in the school. Funds for the FC 320 may be used to support the addition of professional staff to work with at-risk students to improve student outcomes through the support prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts at the local level. The adult should be responsible for addressing academic and social needs, communicating with families, advocating for the student, and supporting college and career preparation. Training for adults serving students is integral to this design to ensure that they have the depth of expertise to effectively support at-risk students. The staff person can be (but not limited to) a social worker, case manager, graduation coach, re-engagement coach, mentor or advisor. In addition to providing academic and personal support for students at risk of not obtaining a high school diploma, these staff can assist with parent and family engagement strategies and individualized plans for graduation and beyond.

**Positive School Climate and Socio-Emotional Systems of Support:** Many issues with disengaged students and those who may be at risk of dropping out are not academic in nature and therefore require non-academic systems of support. Students’ behavioral health is intricately connected to academic, social, and emotional success at school. Establishing a school climate that promotes students’ behavioral health can also help promote positive and productive functioning and school success. Behavioral health refers to the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of all students, including students with mental health needs.
Funds may be used to assist students to identify, understand, and self-regulate their emotions and interactions with peers and adults. These skills can help to mitigate problematic and disruptive behavior both in and out of the classroom by teaching students how to positively interact and communicate. This programming may also be used to teach students strategies to strengthen problem solving and decision-making skills.

Funds may be used to establish partnerships with community based program providers and other agencies such as social services, child welfare, mental health, and law enforcement. The intent of this programming will be to address the root causes of problematic classroom and school behavior or mental health needs for students who are economically disadvantaged and at risk of dropping out. This work may also address external social factors such as family concerns or substance abuse issues.

Schools may also use grant awards to increase their capacity to implement the Behavioral Health and Public Schools Framework. The Framework emphasizes the importance of establishing and enhancing the three levels of behavioral health, which mirror the layered approach of dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery. The three levels of activities included in the Framework are: 1) supportive school environments that promote the behavioral health of all students through whole-school supportive environments, 2) early interventions that provide collaborative approaches to identify and address behavioral health symptoms early, and 3) intensive services that coordinate intensive interventions for students with significant needs.

**Contextual Learning Opportunities:** Contextual learning occurs when teachers relate subject matter to real world situations. Students are motivated to make connections between knowledge and its applications to their lives as family members, citizens, and workers. When students recognize the connection between their schooling and the impact that it has on their success in the workforce, they tend to become more focused and engaged learners.

Examples of these opportunities include but are not limited to service-learning programs, internships, and work-based learning opportunities, each of which can be a key dropout reduction strategy through which students demonstrate the knowledge and skills required by various state curriculum frameworks, the Common Core of Learning, and 21st century skills.

Service-learning is a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. By connecting service to academic coursework, students are afforded the chance to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills to make a difference in their communities, making learning more relevant.

Work-based Learning is an educational strategy that provides students with real-life work experiences (paid) where they can apply academic and technical skills and develop their employability. The work experience fills the gap between learning and doing and may increase student engagement in school.

Internships are another opportunity for students in high school to try on a career and gain work experience. An internship can either confirm a career interest or lead a student in a new direction. Internships are often for a prescribed time period and may be either paid or unpaid.
**Expansion of the school year/structured learning time and summer transition programs:**
Many students who are in danger of or who have dropped out are often overage and have severe academic deficits, such as being undercredited toward high school graduation or lacking literacy, numeracy, and other academic skills—all necessary to be successful in class work and to meet high academic standards.

Funds may be used to provide programming aimed at providing support to develop academic skills, accelerate learning or earn credits toward graduation in a structured program that is run beyond the school day or in the summer. These expanded learning time opportunities may also provide enrichment and socio-emotional supports to increase school engagement and prepare students for academic success. These interventions should be designed to promote and maintain positive attitudes, anticipate and prevent problems and provide special assistance to those whose problems may manifest themselves more greatly at the high school level.

Funds may also be used to provide summer transition programs for students entering high school for the first time to provide a bridge toward what can often be a more complex and less nurturing high school environment and provide students at-risk for dropping out with tools and support to be successful.

**Meeting the Requirements of the Massachusetts Discipline Law, Chapter 222: An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services and Exclusion from School** which requires any school or district that suspends or expels a student to continue to provide educational services during the time of suspension or expulsion.

**Individual Learning Plans:** The Individual Learning Plan (ILP) a student-directed, multi-year planning tool designed to provide students with ongoing opportunities to plan for their academic, personal/social and career success. Because it is primarily authored by students themselves with guidance from at least one identified caring adult and in consultation with parents/guardians, students are empowered to seek out learning opportunities that align with career interests and self-defined goals. The ILP may improve student engagement as the student comes to own his/her future. Through identification of interests and goals along with an acknowledgement of any barriers to success and supports necessary to overcome those barriers, the ILP maps the academic plan, personal/social skill attainment, and workplace readiness activities required for post-secondary success. Funds may be used for either planning or implementation of ILPs.