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Reducing HIV Risk, Retaining at-risk Girls In-School, and Linking Girls to Services in Eswatini through School-based Early Warning Systems

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Background: Young women who attend more school days and stay in school have a lower risk of incident HIV and HSV-2 infection. Research shows that interventions to increase frequency of school attendance and prevent dropout should be promoted to reduce risk of infection. However, nearly 50 million school-aged girls in Africa are not in school, and are at risk of engaging in numerous drivers of HIV. Further, while vulnerability assessments successfully identify many girls at-risk, a large number are missed. Early Warning Systems (EWS) can identify girls at risk of drop out and provide robust response protocols and supports to retain them in school and reduce their risk to HIV.

Materials & Methods: EWSs are grounded in the “ABCs” of risk behavior: Absenteeism, Behavior, and Course failure. The Bantwana Initiative of World Education (WEI/Bantwana) piloted two versions of the EWS: a teacher-administered tool, and a student self-administered tool. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini, WEI/Bantwana piloted the teacher-administered EWS tool with 24 Guidance and Counselling teachers across six schools. With the support of Peer Educators, WEI/Bantwana piloted the self-administered EWS tool with 517 adolescent girls, who self-assessed their risk of dropping out within a school club-based setting.

Results: The teacher-administered EWS tool identified 36 adolescent girls as at risk of dropping out of school. The student self-administered EWS tool identified 175 adolescent girls (34%) as at risk of dropping out of school. The teachers’ assessment tended to focus on financial risk factors (girls who had outstanding fees and balances), whereas the girls’ self-assessments better tapped into the three risk factors of absenteeism, behavior, and coursework. Of the 175 who met the at-risk criteria, 65 consented to meet with Guidance and

Counselling teachers, and 110 were referred to out-of-school-based support (for post-abuse, health, HIV testing and counseling, and social welfare support). 25 adolescent girls self-reported experiencing sexual abuse, 84 reported being sexually active and 5 reported as engaging in transactional sex. WEI/Bantwana retained 91% of these highly vulnerable girls in school through the EWS and its response protocols.

Conclusions: Results suggest that teachers may be less likely to identify girls at risk of drop out due to factors other than financial needs; deeper training is required to capacitate teachers to see the ABC warning signs. Girls were surprisingly candid about being at-risk, self-reporting gender-based violence, transactional sex and being sexually active, among other indicators. The EWS tool needs to be revised to be a less sensitive instrument, as high numbers of girls were identified as at risk, which could easily overwhelm a nascent EWS and the ability of the school community to implement effective response protocols. Capacity of teachers to fully implement the response protocol, and link girls to services is required. The EWS is a promising approach to identify and retain girls in school, and decrease their risk to HIV. WEI/Bantwana has won onward funding to pilot a digital version of the EWS self-assessment tool to be delivered directly to girls via mobile phones.