RESEARCH-BASED OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

Dropout Prevention

William Mathis, University of Colorado Boulder
January 2013

Dropouts are, without a doubt, an important social, economic and educational issue. Life chances for steady employment and a living wage are dramatically lower for those without a high school diploma. The average high school graduate earned $42,000 in 2008 while the average dropout's salary was $23,000. Graduates also have higher employment rates, better health histories and lower incarceration rates.[1]

As demonstrated by President Obama's proposals on high school dropouts in his state of the union message[2] and in policy pronouncements,[3] this issue is garnering a great deal of political attention. With revisions to the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (currently called NCLB) on the horizon, dropout rates may also play a role as an accountability measure.[4]

Incidence: Trying to bring some order to the variety of ways dropouts are defined,[5] the federal government adopted a more rigid, rigorous and uniform definition, which counts everyone who does not graduate from high school in the standard four years.[6] This change was not without controversy, as some groups argued that students who took longer or who took alternate paths should be counted.[7]

November of 2012 saw the first nationwide federal report of dropout rates using the new definition.[8] The results showed the following patterns: overall graduation rates were in the 70% to 85% range, depending on the state; rates for Black children were in the 60% to 75% range; Hispanic children were in the 60% and 80% range; and children from lower-income households graduated in the 60% to 80% range. In a separate estimate (which is consistent with other sources) females graduate at a 7% higher rate than their male peers.[9]

Causes and Contributing Factors: There is no single factor that explains or predicts the likelihood of dropping-out. A complex mix of individual, family, school and community factors leads to "a long process of disengagement that may begin before a child enters school."[10] The National Dropout Prevention Center identified 25 significant predictors. Typically, students are at risk when they have several (three or more) of the risk factors. These include items such as low socioeconomic status, students holding jobs, low parental educational level, family disruption, low education expectations, high-risk peer groups, low achievement, poor attendance and misbehavior.[11] A key lesson from this research is that the core underlying reasons primarily lie outside the school.[12] As educators have little control over individual risk factors, social conditions, and larger social problems, they are faced with effectively dealing with the manifestation of external factors.[13] In fact, schools, by themselves control only about 20% of the variance in dropout rates.[14] Accordingly, reducing dropout rates requires solutions that go beyond (yet certainly include) school functions.

"Dropout Factories": A great deal of recent rhetoric has used the term "Dropout Factory" to refer to a school with more than 40% attrition of the student cohort from ninth grade through graduation. Non-promoted students are considered as dropouts in this definition.[15] These so-called "dropout factories" have twice the minority enrollment percentages of other US schools; they are concentrated in southern and southwestern states and in major cities. The students in these schools should unquestionably be a focus of dropout prevention efforts. But the term is misleading, given that the schools are a relatively small part of the process leading to dropping out (and may in fact be a positive force, counter-acting outside-school causes). These schools have almost twice the poverty rate (69%) of the nation (35%), and the research is clear that "Poverty is the key correlate."[16]

Dropout Prevention Programs: The federally funded "What Works Clearinghouse" reviewed the research on effective dropout prevention programs, examining six program categories and finding four to be moderately successful and two to be minimally successful.[17]

Moderately successful strategies

- Assign qualified adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out, maintain low caseloads, and purposefully match students with adults.

- In conjunction with other supports, provide academic support and enrichment.

- Personalize the learning environment and instructional process, provide encouragement and support, and establish a sense of belonging and a positive school climate.

- Provide rigorous and relevant instruction, giving students the skills to graduate and skills that are directly relevant to that student's post-secondary options.

Minimally successful strategies

- Little evidence of dropout reduction is seen from implementing systems aimed at collecting and analyzing comprehensive, long-term data using unique student IDs.

- Programs for classroom behavior and social skills have proven to be more effective at pre-school levels rather than at higher levels.

Policy Recommendations

- Because most dropout risk factors are centered outside the school, it is vital for schools to coordinate with social and health agencies to address the underlying core causes. Multiple risk factors must be addressed with multiple strategies, focused on students' personal assets and on skill building, academic support, family outreach and environmental change.[18]

- Implement high-quality early education programs, which have been shown to reduce dropouts as well as improve a broad range of social, economic and educational factors.[19]

- Educators must be trained to spot and report dropout warning signs such as home troubles, absenteeism, social difficulties, disengagement, and poor grades, in order to initiate vital early reporting and intervention strategies.[20]

- Schools should assign adult advocates, with appropriate backgrounds and low caseloads, to work with students with a high risk of dropping-out. Adequate training and support is crucial.[21]

- Schooling itself does play an important role. Schools can keep students engaged and successful if they provide academic support, challenging but engaging and relevant instruction, and post-secondary guidance geared to the needs of the individual, all *in conjunction with* other supports.[22]

- Laws should require students to attend school until age 18 or graduation.[23]

- Schools, districts and states should avoid or revoke policies that discourage successful school completion such as grade retention,[24] high school exit examinations,[25] and out-of-school suspensions for minor offences.[26]

- Since schools have limited control over most causes of dropouts,[27] great care should be taken in the design of any school accountability system that incorporates dropout rates.[28] Policymakers should not, as a matter of ethics and common sense, hold schools responsible for matters that are not within their control and for which the policymakers themselves do not provide adequate resources to resolve.

- Schools must consciously and deliberately work to create safe and welcoming school environments and cultures.[29]

Notes and References

1 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2011). *Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972–2008*. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved December 5, 2012, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/dropout08/index.asp.

Alliance for Excellent Education (2006, August). *Saving Futures, Saving Dollars: The Impact of Education on Crime Reduction and Earnings*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved December 5, 2012, from http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/impact/economic_analysis.

2 Strauss, V. (2012, January 24). Obama: States should require kids stay in school until 18 or graduation. *WashingtonPost.com* Retrieved December 5, 2012, from http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/obama-states-should-require-kids-stay-in-school-until-18-or-graduation/2012/01/24/gIQAPg63OQ_blog.html.

3 Office of the Press Secretary (2010, March 1). President Obama announces steps to reduce dropout rate and prepare students for college and careers (press release). Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved December 5,2012 from http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/president-obama-announces-steps-reduce-dropout-rate-and-prepare-students-college-an.

4 See, for example,

Alliance for Excellent Education (2012, January). *Waiving away high school graduation rate accountability?* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved December 5, 2012, from http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/fact_sheets/waiving_away_high_school_graduation_rate_accountability;

Boundy, K.B. (2008, May 14). Limited Testimony of Kathleen B. Boundy, Co-Director, Center for Law and Education, on Proposed Title I Regulations §200.2, 200.7, and 200.19. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education. Retrieved December 5, 2012, from http://www.cleweb.org/sites/default/files/NCLBBostontestimony.pdf.

5 NCES, 2011.

6 Press office (2012, November 26). States report new high school graduation rates using more accurate, common measure (press release). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved December 5, 2012, from http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/states-report-new-high-school-graduation-rates-using-more-accurate-common-measur.

7 Sawchuk, S. (2008).Graduation rate proposals draw controversy. *Education Daily*. Retrieved December 15, 2012, from http://www.all4ed.org/files/EdDaily_062608a.pdf.

8 U.S. Department of Education (2012). Provisional data file: sy2010-11 four-year regulatory adjusted cohort graduation rates (table). Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved December 5, 2012 from http://www2.ed.gov/documents/press-releases/state-2010-11-graduation-rate-data.pdf.

9 Diplomas count: Report pegs national high school graduation rate at 71.7 percent, highest since 1980s (2011, June 13). *Straight A's: Public Education Policy And Progres, 11* (12).Retrieved December 13, 2012 from http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/straight_as/06132011

10 Hammond, C., Smink, J., Drew, S. & Linton, D. (May 2007, May*). Dropout risk factors and exemplary programs: A technical report*, 2. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. Retrieved December 5, 2012, from http://www.dropoutprevention.org/major-research-reports/dropout-risk-factors-exemplary-programs-technical-report.

11 Hammond, Smink, Drew, & Linton, 2007.

12 Rumberger, R. & Lim, S. (2008, October). *Why students drop out of school: A review of 25 years of research.* Santa Barbara, CA: California Dropout Research Project. Retrieved December 1, 2012, from http://www.slocounty.ca.gov/Assets/CSN/PDF/Flyer+-+Why+students+drop+out.pdf.

13 Christie, C.A., Jolivette, K., & Nelson, C. M. (2007, January 1). School characteristics related to high school dropout rates. *Remedial and Special Education, 28* (6), 325-339.

14 Rumberger & Lim, 2008.

15 Associated Press (2007). *Dropout Factories: Take a closer Look at failing schools across the country* (interactive online graphic). Retrieved December 5, 2012 from http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/wdc/dropout/index.html.

16 Balfanz, R. & Legters, N. (2004, September). *locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? Where are they located? Who attends them?.* Baltimore: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, Johns Hopkins University. Retrieved December 1, 2012, from http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techReports/Report70.pdf.

17 What Works Clearinghouse (2008, August). *Dropout Prevention.* Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved December 1, 2012 from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide.aspx?sid=9.

National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2008). *Dropout prevention practice guide*, NCEE 2008-4025. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved December 1, 2012, from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/dp_pg_090308.pdf.

18 Hammond, Smink, Drew, & Linton, 2007;

Silverstein, J., Yettick, H., Foster, S., Welner, K., & Shepard, L. (2007). *Dropout policies: Research based strategies* (brochure). Retrieved December 6, 2012 from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/dropout-policies-research-based-strategies;

Rumberger & Lim, 2008.

19 Barnett. W. S. (2008). Preschool Education and its lasting effects: Research and policy implications. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved October 3, 2012 from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/preschool-education,.

RAND (2005). Proven Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions. Research Brief. RB-9145-PNC. Santa Monica, CA..

Nores, M., Belfield, C., Barnett, S., & Schweinhart, L. (2005, Fall). Updating the economic impacts of the High/Scope Perry preschool program. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis. 27*(3), 245-262.

20 Silverstein, Yettick, Foster, Welner, & Shepard, 2007.

Rumberger & Lim, 2008.

21 National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008.

22 National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008.

23 Rumberger & Lim, 2008;

Strauss, 2012.

24 Rumberger & Lim, 2008;

Dropouts (2004, August 3; updated 2011, June 16). Issues (online supplement). *Education Week*. Retrieved December 6, 2012, from http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/dropouts/.

25 Rumberger & Lim, 2008;

Sparks, S. (2011, June 8). Panel finds few learning benefits in high-stakes exams. *Education Week*. Retrieved December 6, 2012, from http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/06/08/33academy-2.h30.html (subscription required).

26 Losen, D. (2011). *Discipline Policies, Successful Schools, and Racial Justice*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved December 5, 2012, from   http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/discipline-policies.

27 Rumberger & Lim, 2008.

28 Chudowski, N. & Gayler, K. (2003, March 15) Effects of high school exit exams on dropout rates (panel discussion summary report). Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy. Retrieved January 16, 2013, from http://www.cep-dc.org/publications/index.cfm?selectedYear=2003;
direct link available at
http://www.cep-dc.org/cfcontent_file.cfm?
Attachment=ChudowskyGayler%5FPanelSummary%5FHSDropoutRates%5F031503%2Epdf.

29 Biegel, S. & Kuehl, S. J. (2010). *Safe at school: Addressing the school environment and LGBT safety through policy and legislation*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved Dece,ber 6. 2012, from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/safe-at-school.