

DROPOUTS

Keeping Students in School

Background

Statistics show that poor and minority students are at a much higher risk of dropping out of high school than their white counterparts. In recent decades, the importance of a high school diploma has dramatically increased and the consequences of dropping out of school have become increasingly severe.

- Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed than those who complete high school. When dropouts do secure work, on average they earn less money than their peers who completed high school do.
- Dropouts are more likely to receive public assistance than those who finish high school but do not go on to college.
- 68% of all prison inmates are high school dropouts.

Despite the increased importance of a high school education, completion rates over the past 25 years have only increased slightly. In 1993, approximately 381,000 students in grades 10 through 12 dropped out of school, and approximately 3.4 million persons in the United States ages 16 through 24 were high school dropouts. Current research suggests that dropping out of school is a process rather than a single event. A negative school

experience influences many students to leave before they receive their diplomas and may be caused by one or several of the factors listed below:

- High stakes testing and grade retention.
- Zero tolerance policies for school discipline that lead to frequent suspensions and expulsions.
- Inadequate funding and resources.
- Lack of support from teachers and community.

National Trends

In at least seven states that provide dropout data to the federal government, minorities make up over 50% of the number of dropouts. According to a 1998 report from the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 12 percent of students were dropouts, defined as young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who were not enrolled in high school and who had not received a diploma or high school equivalency certificate. Although this figure is lower than the percentage of dropouts 20 years ago, the data still reveals a serious gap between the races. Eight percent of whites dropped out while about fourteen percent of Blacks and almost thirty percent of Hispanics dropped out.

Language difficulties are likely an enormous barrier to high school completion. Over 40 percent of foreign-born Hispanics between the ages of 16 and 24 are high school dropouts. This evidence indicates that an alarming number of foreign born Hispanics do not receive the basic level of education thought to be essential in today's economy.

Although 90 percent of whites between the ages of 18 and 24 had received a high school diploma or its equivalent in 1998, only 81 percent of blacks and 63 percent of Hispanics had completed high school. While the graduation rate of black students has improved slightly over the last few decades, the percentage of Hispanic students who receive a high school diploma or its equivalent has not risen since the 1970s. Dropout rates in urban schools, where poor and minority students are often concentrated, far exceed the national average. Reported statistics are alarming:

- In the 47 largest school districts, the average dropout rate is nearly twice the national average.
- In 1992-1993 one out of four urban school districts had a four-year dropout rate greater than 35%.
- Dropout rates in urban schools in New Jersey were as high as 31% in 1995-1996 and, in the last ten years has been as high as 47%.

Problems with Dropout Reporting

This grim situation may be much worse because current statistics suggest that actual dropout rates are much higher

than the rates reported by schools. Schools may count dropouts in ways that are misleading to the public because of economic incentives and political pressure from local authorities that require schools to maintain certain standards. It is safe to assume that while dropout rates are likely to underestimate the number of students leaving school, they rarely overestimate the number. There are several ways in which dropout statistics may not accurately reflect the number of students who leave school:

- Failure to include summer dropouts (students who complete one school year but fail to enroll the next).
- Failure to include as dropouts students who move to adult education GED classes.
- Varying definitions of dropouts that fail to include students in all age groups. For example, students who dropped out in junior high may not be included in a district's statistics.

More careful monitoring must be done in order to develop effective remedies for improving education for the nation's students and ensuring that more students leave high school with diplomas.

For the past several years there has been a call in the nation for schools to be accountable for their actions. Increased reliance by young Americans on high school equivalency exams show that public schools may not be living up to their goals. More and more Americans who report themselves as high school graduates are actually GED recipients who obtained the credential after dropping out of school. The numbers of students who have completed high

school can be misleading since both those who received diplomas and those who completed GED requirements are included. However, studies have shown that students who drop out of high school and acquire a GED do not fair as well in the labor market as students who stay in school and earn a high school diploma. One way parents can better determine their school's effectiveness is by comparing the number of high school diplomas awarded to the number of GEDs awarded every year.

Civil Rights Concerns

Black and Hispanic students have the highest dropout rates. Compared to white students, Blacks drop out nearly twice as often as whites. Hispanics are by far at greatest risk. Their dropout rate is nearly four times the rate for whites.

What You Can Do

Insist upon accurate reporting. Dropout rates should reflect the number of students enrolled in a freshman class in a given year who fail to graduate four years later. To ensure all students are counted, school districts should assign an identification number to each student, along with information regarding their racial and economic backgrounds when they enter high school. These numbers can then be compared to those of the students who graduate four years later. Identification numbers should follow students as they transfer in and out of school districts to ensure that these students are accounted for and not "lost" in the system.

Write letters to your congressman and state representatives demanding that your school district

and state provide accurate dropout statistics to the public. Voice your concerns about accurate reporting and call for legislation that will require dropout rates and related statistics to be made readily available to the public. Insist that estimates are not good enough. Lobby for one reliable method of determining dropout levels for school districts and states.

File complaints about underlying problems that may be contributing to a high dropout rate, such as high stakes testing, inadequate resources, and intolerant discipline. (For more information, see Alerts regarding these topics at www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights).

Studies have shown that feelings of isolation, fear, and teacher disparagement may lead to higher dropout rates. Students who are often reported absent are more likely to drop out of school all together. Parents and community groups can take action by finding out what is going on in their children's schools and filing appropriate complaints where action needs to be taken.

Encourage your school to invest in dropout prevention programs. If your district already has a prevention program in place, check to see what it does and whether it has been effective in keeping students in school. Students who are at risk of dropping out of school may need a new educational environment that includes more attention and positive reinforcement combined with clearly articulated and enforced behavioral expectations to help keep them in school. Your local dropout prevention program should include the following aspects:

- A smaller, more personal environment such as a school within a school or alternative school environments.
- Personal attention from adults, such as a mentoring program.
- A counseling program to deal with students' disaffection with education.
- A proactive attendance monitoring program, checking on students' presence at school and their presence in the classroom.

Where to Go for More Information

U.S. Department of Education

www.ed.gov
 400 Maryland Avenue, SW
 Washington, DC 20202-0498
 1-800-USA-LEARN

National Center for Education Statistics

www.nces.ed.gov
 1990 K Street, NW,
 Washington, DC 20006
 phone: (202) 502-7300

The National Dropout Prevention Center

www.dropoutprevention.org
 Clemson University
 209 Martin Street
 Clemson, SC 29631-1555
 phone: (864) 656-2599
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