

KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief

Reducing the High School Dropout Rate

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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Education has always played a role in determining Americans' economic and occupational success, but its influence has never been greater than it is today. Over the past two decades, people without high school diplomas have suffered an absolute decline in real income and have dropped further behind individuals with more education. The result is a pattern of increased economic marginalization for those Americans with the least education. Dropouts who subsequently complete the requirements for a General Educational Diploma (GED) fare better than those who do not, but their earning capacity remains very limited (Murnane and Tyler, 2000). Reducing the dropout rate therefore requires urgent attention from policy makers and the public at large.

This indicator brief outlines five broad strategies for reducing the dropout rate:

- **Make it harder for students to drop out of school**
- **Address the underlying causes of dropping out.**
- **Address the needs of the groups at highest risk of dropping out.**
- **Strengthen school readiness.**
- **Strengthen the skills and understanding of the adults who affect teens' motivation and ability to stay in school.**

1. Make it harder for students to drop out of school.

Researchers who conducted a large-scale review of dropout prevention programs, collecting data for more than 10,000 students, began their report with this observation: "Dropping out of school is easy. Students who have done it say they simply stopped going to school one day. Some said they dropped out because they thought school principals or teachers wanted them to. Others said they dropout out because of circumstances beyond their control. Either way, they may have encountered little resistance from others around them" (Dynarski & Gleason 1999, p. 1).

- **Root out policies that tacitly permit dropping out or encourage students to leave school.** Many teens say that they were encouraged by administrators or teachers to stop coming to school. Some researchers see evidence of a “push-out” syndrome in many schools, where teachers and administrators make little effort to hold onto potential dropouts (Druian & Butler, 2001). Case in point: a report by the Hispanic Dropout Project concluded that schools often make active efforts to retain Hispanic students until they have been counted in that year’s census. Once schools have received their state monies for the year, there are no sanctions for dropouts, and schools can experience relief from overcrowding as their enrollment decreases (Hispanic Dropout Project 1998). The report noted that district and state assessment policies can provide incentives for schools to drop low-performing students from their rosters including those with limited proficiency in English, need for special education services, or other academic needs.
- **Strengthen accountability for keeping young people on track.** One strategy for reducing the dropout rate is to make the issue part of administrators’ performance evaluations (Clowes, 1999). However, so many factors affect the dropout rate that educators should not be held solely responsible for keeping students in school. Nor should the dropout rate be the only method of gauging progress in serving youth. This was a key lesson of Casey’s New Futures project. As a participant in the Dayton program noted, "We didn't look at child welfare, juvenile court problems, [or other issues]...Educators felt they were under fire and were the only system being measured." By only measuring educational outcomes, a report on New Futures concluded, the program sent the message that “the schools were accountable, and everyone else could stand outside the fray and snipe” (AECF, 2001).
- **Offer students the assistance and opportunities they need to stay in school.** When students are failing academically, alienated from school emotionally, or on the verge of dropping out, they need access to services that can help them and their families deal with personal and academic problems. Many approaches are possible, such as counseling, mentoring, and changes in curriculum. The key is for every school to ask what it would take to keep its students through graduation, and to follow through with the systemic changes needed to make that possible.

- **Stress the full participation of youth.** Over the last decade, the emphasis in the field of youth development has shifted from assuring that young people are problem-free to assuring that they are fully prepared. Now it is recognized that fully prepared is not enough. Young people need to be *fully participating* (Pittman, 2000). Some dropout prevention efforts are expanding opportunities for service learning. They are integrating an academic curriculum with structured time for organized service experiences that meet real needs in the community. Initiatives that involve teens, parents, and other adults in community projects can be especially effective (Simpson, 1997).
- **Gear dropout prevention efforts to the age and profile of the student.** Several models hold promise, including alternative middle schools; alternative high schools for students with motivation or academic potential; GED programs; or restructured schools and classrooms. However, none of these models will benefit every potential dropout. Middle school programs have found that an intensive approach—one that accelerates students’ progress to allow them to catch up with their age peers—helps more students stay in school. For high school students, programs that aim to keep them on track and in school may work for those who are motivated to succeed; for others, a GED program may be a more realistic route (Dynarski & Gleason, 1999).
- **Base policy and program design on solid evidence about why young people drop out of school in a particular locality.** Many factors affect the likelihood that teens will drop out of school. Economic stress, grade retention, misbehavior, frequent moves, teen pregnancy, low self-esteem, and high absenteeism are all associated with higher dropout rates, but different factors are at work in different places. The same remedy will not work in every community. Researchers have found that the risk factors commonly used by dropout-prevention programs to identify likely dropouts often do not predict accurately which students will drop out (Dynarski & Gleason, 1999). To be effective, programs and policies need to identify and address local conditions or factors that raise the dropout rate. This requires adequate research and analytic tools as well as the capacity to tailor programs to local conditions.
- **Strengthen students’ understanding of the connection between education and job opportunities.** Some dropout prevention programs combine intensive, individualized basic skills development with work-related projects. The goal is not only to enhance skills, but also

to make clear the relationship between education, on one hand, and economic and job prospects on the other (Druian & Butler 2001).

2. Address the underlying causes of dropping out.

- **Promote awareness of the links between staying in school and the resources available to families and communities.** Researchers have demonstrated that the odds of dropping out are influenced by many forces beyond the classroom or school. Access to economic opportunity also affects the dropout rate: low-income students are three times more likely to drop out than middle-income students (NCES, 2002). Researchers have identified an income threshold below which total years of schooling decreases significantly: roughly three times the official poverty line (Axinn, Duncan and Thornton, 1997). Children in families that experience persistent economic stress are more likely to drop out than those in families that experience intermittent stress.
- **Address the social and emotional conditions associated with poverty.** Families who live in poverty are less able to supply the nutrition and materials needed for children's healthy development. They have less access to safe neighborhoods, good schools, appropriate recreational facilities and adequate health services. Moreover, children growing up in poverty have less access to learning resources (such as tutoring or enrichment programs) than their better off schoolmates. But it is not a simple lack of buying power that makes children in low-income families more likely to drop out. Rather, the decision to leave school often stems from the social and psychological events surrounding poverty. In recent years, researchers have been examining the link between economic security and children's emotional status. They have shown that economic loss is associated with changes in parenting practices, with adverse consequences for children's emotional well-being. The family stress associated with poverty diminishes children's likelihood of finishing high school. (Teachman, Paasch, Day and Carver, 1997. Conflicts about money appear to have a particularly negative influence on boys. (Conger, Conger and Elder, 1997). More research is needed to shed light on the specific aspects of the home environment that reduce low-income children's chances of educational success. As they develop policies and programs, decision makers need to know whether children's chances of finishing school are predicted by particular patterns of parent-child interaction, the availability of educational materials, or some combination of these and other factors.

- **Focus resources on those young people who face multiple risk factors.** KIDS COUNT has established a Family Risk Index that identifies as a “high-risk child” one who lives in a family with four or more of these risk factors: 1) Child is not living with two parents 2) Household head is high school dropout; 3) Family income is below the poverty line; 4) Child is living with parent(s) who is underemployed; 5) Family is receiving welfare benefits; 6) Child does not have health insurance. In March 2000, 27 percent of the 16-to-19-year-olds in the high-risk category were high school dropouts (not a high school graduate and not currently in school). For teens not in the high-risk category the dropout rate was 7 percent (AECF, 2001).
- **Address the linkage between residential mobility and dropping out.** Stable housing can matter as well: children’s likelihood of completing high school diminishes with each move they make (Weissbourd, 1996). Community development efforts that focus on housing can therefore help to reduce the dropout rate.
- **Address minor problems before they snowball into the kinds of issues that keep students out of school.** Problems that seem minor can become impediments to school attendance, leading young people to drop out. Lost eyeglasses that are not replaced, persistent teasing that is not addressed, or conflict with a single teacher can begin a chain of events that ends with a young person leaving school (Weissbourd, 1996).

3. **Address the needs of those groups at highest risk of dropping out.**

Each year, across the nation hundreds of thousands of students leave school without graduating. These are young people of every demographic description, but the problem is more common among some groups than others. Black students are more likely to drop out than white students: the difference between black and white dropout rates narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s, but has remained constant over the last decade. Hispanic youth continue to have a high dropout rate when compared to whites, blacks, or Asian/Pacific Islanders school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Students with disabilities are more likely than other students to drop out.

- **Focus intensively on strategies to help Hispanic youth stay in school.** Hispanic students are more than twice as likely as black students and more than three times as likely as white

students to drop out of school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). In the mid-nineties, a task force appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education spent two years studying issues surrounding the Hispanic dropout problem and provided a set of policy-relevant recommendations. In its final report, the Hispanic Dropout Project offered these key recommendations: 1) Depoliticize education for Hispanic youth, separating it from debates about language policy or immigration. Move forward at the local, state, and national levels with a coherent educational agenda. 2) Fund public schools appropriately to upgrade physical facilities, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. 3) Streamline and make intelligible those policies that parents and children must follow. 4) Change or discard those school policies that tacitly permit dropping out or actually encourage Hispanic students to drop out. 5) Just as standards for content and performance are critical in this age of education reform, districts and states should develop standards for school conditions, school and class size, and student opportunity-to-learn. 6) Districts and state education agencies should design comprehensive strategies for dropout prevention tied to the states' standards and that take account of students' different needs at different points in their lives (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998).

- **Provide incentives and opportunities for students in high-poverty neighborhoods to succeed.** In these neighborhoods, education reform is not sufficient. They must be augmented with social-capital and economic-development initiatives that look at the whole community and the incentives, rewards, and opportunities it offers for academic and occupational success. These initiatives need to find ways to increase employment, enterprise and role opportunities for the families and youth who reside there (AECF,1995).
- **Focus intensively on dropout prevention for high school students with disabilities and other special needs.** Given high dropout rates for students with disabilities and other special needs, special education programs and policies designed for high school students need to be re-examined. This is particularly true in light of standards-based education reform. A key strategy of this movement is to increase graduation requirements. States have taken varied approaches to including students with disabilities in their efforts to raise standards. Some states have alternative exit documents such as “certificates of completion” for students with disabilities who do not meet standard graduation requirements. Many states offer only a standard diploma, with requirements varying across states. States that require students to pass graduation examinations also vary with respect to requirements for students with disabilities. The question remains: how will these reforms affect the ability of students with disabilities to

graduate? As things stand, nearly one in three students with disabilities leaves school before graduation. Policy makers are grappling with difficult choices. Accommodating individual student's diverse learning needs within a framework of state standards can be difficult and often requires modification of standards, instruction, and/or assessments. When ad hoc adjustments are made at the local level, such modifications can weaken accountability. States can respond by building into accountability systems flexible policies to define appropriate modifications for use at the local level (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2002). At the same time, research is needed to determine how the diverse approaches taken by different states affect long-term educational and employment outcomes for students with disabilities and other special needs.

4. Strengthen school readiness.

A growing body of evidence suggests that efforts to improve academic achievement and reduce the dropout rate need to begin long before children enter high school – or even middle school.

- **Address families' access to economic resources and human services in children's early years.** Families' economic situations affect children's educational attainment throughout childhood. But low income is more strongly associated with dropping out when it occurs early in a child's life than when it occurs in later childhood or adolescence (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan and Maritato, 1997). Policies or programs that bolster family resources in the middle or high school years are not sufficient. Improving the effectiveness of the home as a learning environment is a key to promoting long-term school success (Druian & Butler, 2001).
- **In particular, improve access to health care, beginning with prenatal care.** Maternal health and the availability of prenatal care influence children's birth weight, which in turn affect children's likelihood of dropping out. Students who had low birth weights are significantly more likely than other students to drop out of school; this is true even when comparisons are made among siblings growing up in the same household.(Conley & Bennett, 2000).
- **Expand access to high –quality early education programs.** There is new evidence that high-quality preschool experiences can improve graduation rates. In 2001, an article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported on a large study that

followed nearly a thousand children from low-income families who took part in the Chicago Child-Parent Center study in the mid-1980's. Most of the children were African American. It showed that "public investments in early educational programs in the first decade of life can contribute positively to children's later success" (Reynolds et al., 2001). The study found that, compared with similar children who were not in the program, participants had higher educational attainment up to age 20. They stayed in school slightly longer, and were more likely to graduate from high school.

5. Strengthen the skills and understanding of the adults who affect teens' motivation and ability to stay in school.

Some young people do well and stay in school despite tough circumstances. Researchers studying their resilience have found that children need personal anchors—stable, positive emotional relationships with at least one parent or key person. Parents are the key people in youngsters' lives, and they can benefit from family support efforts. Teachers and other adults can play an important role in fostering resilience. They may mentor students, either formally or informally. Or, they may play a role by offering something extra, perhaps by offering emotional support during hard times, acting as the student's advocate when conflict arises in school or at home, or providing an opportunity to pursue a special talent or interest (Garbarino, 1995).

- **Expand access to parent education and family support programs geared to the challenges of raising adolescents.** While peers, teachers, coaches, and friends' parents can take on added importance as children become teens, parents remain a powerful influence in promoting healthy development and keeping their children on track. But relatively little attention has been paid to supporting the parents of adolescents (Simpson, 1997). Providing increased access to parent education and family support programs can help parents negotiate conflicts or crises that can lead their children to leave school. These programs need effective outreach, curricula, staff development, evaluation, and linkages with other local services.
- **Use a variety of media and formats to offer more and better information to the parents of teens.** As researchers gather new findings and generate new knowledge about parenting adolescents, better ways of disseminating the information are needed. Stronger informational resources would benefit not only parents and teens, but also policy makers, health care providers, human services providers, religious leaders, advocates, and others.

- **Work with schools of education to recruit and prepare teachers who are motivated and able to teach students who have a history of failure.** A review of many federal dropout prevention initiatives showed that the effectiveness of programs for at-risk students depended more on the choice of teachers than the choice of curriculum (Dynarski & Gleason, 1999).
- **Provide ongoing staff development to teachers who work with at-risk youth.** Key characteristics of successful dropout prevention programs appear to be strong, sustained commitment on the part of teachers and strong leadership on the part of administrators (Druian & Butler, 1999). To maintain this level of commitment as well as expand knowledge and skills, school staff need ongoing support.
- **Involve teachers, parents, and teachers need to participate in the planning of dropout prevention programs.** Schools are often structured in ways that do not meet teens' learning needs, and restructuring efforts can increase their holding power. One obstacle to successful change initiatives is that grants are often written by one group and implemented by another. As a review of dropout prevention initiatives observed, "Enthusiasm for restructuring on the part of grant writers did not always translate into enthusiasm for restructuring on the part of teachers and principals, whose activities, roles, and relationships may be altered by restructuring" (Dynarski & Gleason 1999).

Many dropout prevention initiatives are now underway. They employ diverse strategies to increase the holding power of high schools, including counseling and support services, attendance monitoring, challenging curricula, accelerated learning strategies, culturally sensitive parental outreach, stronger links between middle and high schools, community service, and school-to-work programs. Some states have expanded compulsory education to include sixteen- or seventeen-year-olds. These efforts are important, but more must be done. Decades of research and practice have shown that when it comes to reducing the dropout rate, focusing on what happens in high schools is crucial but insufficient.

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www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/CReSPaR.html.

Dropout Prevention Demonstration Program
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National Dropout Prevention Center/Network
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