

KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief

Reducing the High School Dropout Rate

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Researchers use many different methods to calculate the high school dropout rate, and depending on the approach, the numbers can look very different. Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the KIDS COUNT Data Center reports the number and percentage of young people, ages 16 to 19, who are not enrolled in high school and are not high school graduates in a given year. Using this yardstick, in 2007, there were 1.2 million dropouts in the U.S., and the nation's dropout rate was 7 percent. The data reflect wide geographic variation: five states had dropout rates that were 10 percent or higher (Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, and Nevada). Eleven urban school districts also had dropout rates that were 10 percent or higher (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009).

Other researchers look at the percentage of ninth graders who fail to graduate with their class at the end of four years. Using this yardstick, a recent study reported a national dropout rate of 29 percent. The study found that nearly half of the ninth graders in the nation's 50 largest cities (47 percent) do not graduate with their class in four years. In three cities (Cleveland, Detroit, and Indianapolis), the on-time graduation rate is under 40 percent (Swanson, 2009).

No matter which method is used, the key finding is the same: too many students are leaving school without the knowledge and skills they need to meet the demands of twenty-first century workplaces and communities. By any measure, the problem is particularly pressing in urban school districts, and most strongly affects students of color and males.

The costs of dropping out have always been high, but never higher than today. Over the past three decades, people without a high school diploma have seen 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. Recent studies show that between the ages of 18 and 64, dropouts, on average, earn some \$400,000 less than high school graduates. For males, the differential is even higher—\$485,000 (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). While dropouts who subsequently complete the requirements for a General Education Diploma (GED) fare better than those who do not, their earning capacity is nevertheless lower than graduates with high school diplomas (Caputo, 2005). As the report from the Center for Labor Market Studies concludes, “The costs of dropping out of high school today are substantial and have risen over time, especially for young men, who find it almost impossible to earn an adequate income to take care of themselves and their families” (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009, p. 2).

This *KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief* outlines five broad strategies for reducing the dropout rate:

- **Adopt a long-term approach that begins with strengthening school readiness**

- **Enhance the holding power of schools, with an intensive focus on ninth grade**
- **Focus on the forces outside of school that contribute to dropping out**
- **Address the needs of those groups at highest risk of dropping out**
- **Build on the skills and understanding of the adults who affect teens' motivation and ability to stay in school**

- **Adopt a long-term approach that begins with strengthening 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.

Improve access to health care, beginning with prenatal care. Maternal health and the availability of prenatal care influence children's birth weights, which in turn affect children's likelihood of dropping out. Students who weighed less than 5.5 pounds at birth are about 33 percent more likely to drop out of school; this is true even when comparisons are made among siblings growing up in the same household (Johnson & Schoeni, 2007).

Address families' access to economic resources and human services in children's early years. Children's educational attainment throughout childhood is affected by their families' economic situations. Children who experience poverty early in their lives are more likely to drop out than children who experience poverty in later childhood or adolescence (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997). Policies or programs that bolster family resources in the middle or high school years are therefore insufficient. Improving the effectiveness of the home as a learning environment is critical to promoting long-term school success (Druian & Butler, 2001).

Expand access to high-quality early education programs. A large and growing body of research links high-quality preschool experiences with a greater likelihood of high school graduation. One of these studies followed nearly 1,000 mostly African American children from low-income families who took part in the Chicago Child-Parent Center study in the mid-1980s. The study concluded that, compared with similar children who were not in the program, participants had higher educational attainment up to age 20, they stayed in school longer, and were more likely to graduate (Reynolds et al., 2001).

Provide intensive support to students who struggle in elementary and middle school. Researchers say that students can get off-track as early as elementary school, and that every year a child is not promoted from one grade to the next significantly decreases his or her chances of graduating high school (Caputo, 2005). School districts should consider evidence-based alternatives to retention, including early intervention, tutoring, and intensive remediation efforts. Students who fall behind in core subjects, including reading and math, are especially prone to dropping out (Steinberg & Almeida, 2008). Some districts offer reading and math labs, where struggling students can keep from falling behind (Bost & Klare, 2007).

Strengthen middle schools. School districts can study feeder patterns in areas with high dropout rates to determine what middle schools are doing (or not doing) to prepare their students for high school (Bost & Klare, 2007). Closer coordination between middle schools and high schools can help to ease the transition to ninth grade.

- **Enhance the holding power of schools, with an intensive focus on ninth grade.** Studies of high school dropouts point to several factors that play a key role in students' decision to leave school including, disengagement from classroom instruction, not being promoted, behavior issues, high rates of absenteeism, and poor or failing grades in core subjects (Azzam 2007; Kennelly & Monrad 2007). While their reasons for leaving school vary, many dropouts share a common experience: They are met with too little resistance from those in charge of their education.

Sustain a focus on the quality of instruction. Although studies have linked dropping out of school with prolonged low achievement, school districts have often given insufficient weight to effective teaching practices as a key strategy for keeping students on track. Indeed, one study called effective instructional design and delivery an “inconspicuous strategy” for dropout prevention, pointing out that effective, evidence-based practice is especially important for keeping students with disabilities on track academically (Bost & Riccomini, 2006, p. 301). Students who have dropped out, when surveyed, say that efforts to make high school curricula and classes more engaging could have helped them stay in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Support students' resiliency. Some young people stay in school and meet graduation requirements despite tough circumstances. Resiliency researchers seek to understand what makes the difference for these students. Their findings point to the wisdom of dropout prevention strategies that make students feel known as individuals, engaging them in school and helping them build confidence, stay healthy, and cope with difficult times in school and in their lives. Drawing on studies linking student outcomes with the relational trust within school communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002); resiliency researchers stress the importance of supportive adult-student relationships. The presence of at least one supportive, caring adult can make a huge difference for a high school student. Researchers also say that dropout prevention strategies should reflect students' own perceptions about the holding power of schools. Prevention strategies must therefore focus not only on programmatic approaches, but also on adults' relationships, beliefs, expectations, and willingness to listen (Hupfeld, 2007).

Establish effective early warning systems. Researchers have identified specific early warning signs that a student is off track and at risk of dropping out. They have focused most intensively on four factors. (1) *On-time promotion*: The first year of high school is especially important. Studies in Chicago and several other cities say that on-time promotion from ninth to tenth grade is highly predictive of whether students will complete high school (Steinberg & Almeida, 2008). (2) *Accrual of required high school credits*: Researchers report that dropouts earned fewer credits than did on-time graduates within each year of high school, and the cumulative credit gap increased with each year. The pattern held across all examined student and school characteristics (student sex,

race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, school location, and sophomore class size) (Hampden-Thompson, Warkentien & Daniel, 2009). (3) *Attendance*: Students who are frequently absent, especially in ninth grade, are at greater risk of dropping out than students who attend regularly (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). (4) *Behavior issues*: Recurring behavior problems in elementary and middle school have been linked with a higher likelihood of dropping out. In particular, students with emotional and behavioral disabilities leave school at higher rates than other students, regardless of the method used to calculate the dropout rate (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). Efforts to establish and teach behavioral norms are important at every level of school, but may be especially important in middle school (Bost & Klare, 2007). Establishing criteria for dropout risk and monitoring the early warning signs not only help to identify at-risk students, but can also lead to more effective, targeted interventions.

Focus on grade nine. Ninth grade appears to be a very precarious stretch on the road to graduation. The difficulty of the transition from middle school to high school is well documented, especially in large cities. Recent studies indicate that most ninth graders at nonselective urban high schools enter with academic skills several years below grade level, and that urban students who drop out have often encountered severe academic problems in ninth grade. Dropout prevention efforts should therefore focus intensively on grade nine (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Neild, Stoner-Eby & Furstenberg, 2008; Steinberg & Almeida, 2008).

Provide credit recovery programs. On-time accrual of credits is a major issue for many high school students (Hampden-Thompson, Warkentien, & Daniel, 2009). For some struggling teens, opportunities to catch up can make the difference between completing school and dropping out. For example, the results of an analysis conducted by the New York City Department of Education showed that 93 percent of the city's dropouts were overage for their grade and behind in the number of credits they had earned toward graduation. After creating multiple pathways specifically designed for overage and under-credited students—including smaller alternative schools and evening “catch-up” programs—the city's graduation rate for these students nearly tripled (American Youth Policy Forum, 2007).

Root out policies that tacitly permit (or encourage) students to leave school. For the vast majority of dropouts, leaving school is not a hasty or impulsive decision. Rather, it is made gradually in response to a growing disengagement from school, falling behind in core subject areas due to missing too many classes, and feeling academically unprepared to handle high school classes. However, research shows that most dropouts are confident that they could have made it through high school if they had tried—and if the expectations and academic standards at their schools had been higher (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In fact, many teens report being 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). In some cases, accountability systems associated with No Child Left Behind mandates may lead schools to “push out” students who are not performing well in classes and on standardized tests (Losen, 2008). In some districts,

disciplinary policies require schools to suspend or expel students who miss too many days (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). School districts with high dropout rates should review disciplinary policies, especially those guiding expulsions, with a view toward making expulsion a very rare event. From the standpoint of dropout prevention, in-school suspension is preferable to out-of-school suspension, especially if the time is used productively (Bost & Klare, 2007).

Strengthen accountability systems and data collection. Many methodological problems need to be solved so that researchers, states, and school districts can do a better job tracking and accounting for school completion. Across the nation, there are many different definitions of dropouts, and many different approaches to calculating dropout rates. In some states or districts, students who leave school but enter GED programs are considered dropouts; in others, they are not. Some states and districts count special education students who leave school with certificates (rather than full diplomas) as dropouts; others do not. In many cases, there is no clear definition of who is a dropout. States and districts also differ in their ability to track students who move from one school to another, or who leave school and then re-enroll. These and many other problems need to be resolved (Bost & Klare, 2007).

Focus on school-level factors and address local conditions. The 2007 National High School Center report, *Approaches to Dropout Prevention: Heeding Early Warning Signs with Appropriate Interventions*, states: “There is growing consensus that school level factors such as grades, retention, attendance, and classroom behavior and engagement are better predictors of dropout than fixed status indicators such as gender, race, and poverty...” (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007, p. 3). Different factors are at work in different places, and the same remedy will not work in every community. To be effective, programs and policies need to identify and address local conditions or factors that raise the dropout rate. They also need to gear dropout prevention efforts to the age and profile of at-risk students.

Provide service-learning opportunities. Successful interventions focus simultaneously on several types of learning—academic, social/emotional and career-related skills and knowledge—and offer students opportunities to explore real-world relationships and experiences that bolster both their competency and confidence (Steinberg & Almeida, 2008). One strategy that combines these types of learning is service-learning. Service-learning incorporates several approaches that are key to retaining students who might otherwise drop out, including strengthening links between school and work, fostering positive relationships between students and adults in the school and larger community, bolstering students’ communication skills, and promoting community engagement. Initiatives that involve teens, parents and other adults in the community have been shown to be especially effective (Bridgeland et al., 2008).

Strengthen students’ understanding of the connection between education and job opportunities. It is important to connect learning with students’ realities and future 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).

- **Focus on the forces outside of school that contribute to dropping out**

Researchers have demonstrated that the odds of dropping out are influenced by many forces beyond the classroom or school. Students who are male, who come from economically disadvantaged families, and who are African American or Hispanic, are at higher risk for leaving school without a diploma (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Many “quiet troubles” associated with disadvantaged communities can make it difficult for students to stay on track. Health issues (hunger, dehydration, asthma, obesity, and vision or hearing problems) can hold students back in school. Psychological issues (depression, anxiety, or fear) can get students off track as well. Caretaking responsibilities (for younger or older relatives) are particularly onerous for high school students. One study conducted in the 1990s found that 12 percent of high school dropouts nationwide left school to take care of a family member, and researchers say that this hurdle remains high (Weissbourd, 2009). Other obstacles to staying in school are less easily categorized: lacking clothes or shoes; lacking a quiet place to do schoolwork, lacking money for books or a computer, and lacking transportation to after-school activities.

Promote awareness of the links between staying in school and the resources available to families and communities. Access to economic opportunity affects the dropout rate. While people in every state and of every race, gender and income level make up the nation’s dropouts, the crisis affects low-income youth, males, Hispanics and African Americans disproportionately (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). Nationally, the dropout rate tends to be highest in districts with high levels of poverty and segregation, and in schools with a high enrollment of special education students. In fact, research shows that the poverty level in a school district had the strongest impact on dropout rates, particularly for African American students (Swanson, 2004).

Address the social and emotional conditions associated with poverty. Young people in low-income families are less likely than those in middle- or upper-income families to finish school (Caputo, 2005). Families living 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 often do not have similar access to learning resources such as tutoring or enrichment programs as children from families with more money. But it is not simply a 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 forces that accompany poverty. For example, researchers studying the link between economic security and children’s emotional status have found that economic loss is associated with changes in parenting practices that have adverse consequences for children’s emotional well-being. Newer research has pointed to the effects of stress on the brains of children living in poverty. One study followed a group of 195 poor and middle-class white students from age 9 until age 17 and concluded that living in poverty not only causes stress, but actually wears down brain cells and impairs memory—which is closely linked with reading, writing and

problem-solving abilities (Evans & Schamberg, 2009). More research is needed to shed light on the specific aspects of children's environments that reduce their chances for educational success.

Address the linkages between residential mobility, school mobility, and dropping out. Stable housing is an important protective factor in the lives of teenagers, but it is not unusual, in urban districts, for about 20 percent of the student population to change schools in any given year (Weissbourd, 2009). Abundant research has linked mobility and the likelihood of dropping out. One recent study also noted that both mobile and non-mobile students are at greater risk for dropping out when they attend schools with high rates of student mobility (South et al., 2007). Community development efforts that focus on housing can therefore help to reduce the dropout rate. In addition, district policies that allow students to remain in the same year when they move or become homeless can keep students from falling through the cracks. States and districts can also improve systems that track students when they move, and can standardize methods of reporting number of credits accrued (Bost & Klare, 2007).

Address minor problems before they snowball into 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 student leaving school without a diploma (Weissbourd, 2009).

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

Each year, hundreds of thousands of students throughout the nation leave school without graduating. While these are young people of every demographic description, dropping out is more common among some groups than others. The KIDS COUNT Data Center reports significant variation in the 2007 dropout rate across racial and ethnic groups: American Indians (12 percent), Hispanics (12 percent) and non-Hispanic blacks (8 percent) had higher dropout rates than non-Hispanic whites (5 percent) and Asians/Pacific Islanders (3 percent) (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009). Researchers using other methods to calculate the dropout rate also report sharp differences among racial and ethnic groups. Researchers who measure the percentage of students who fail to complete high school on time, in four years, show that American Indians (49.4 percent), non-Hispanic blacks (44.7 percent) and Hispanics (42.4 percent) had higher non-completion rates than non-Hispanic whites (22.4 percent) or Asians (18.7 percent) (Swanson, 2009).

Focus intensively on strategies to help Hispanic students stay in school. Hispanic students (12 percent) are more than twice as likely as white students (5 percent) to drop out of high school. Hispanic students are also more likely to drop out than their African American counterparts (8 percent). Researchers have identified several factors that affect the Hispanic dropout rate, including low levels of cultural understanding in schools; insufficient academic advisement; school environments that are not supportive of Hispanic students; fewer placements in college-preparatory courses; and a paucity of demanding courses and high expectations (Nevarez & Rico, 2007). In recent years,

researchers have been adding to the body of knowledge about what is needed and what works to retain Hispanic students in high school through graduation, such as providing parents access to and information about both the school system and the social services and community resources available to them and their children; ensuring that Hispanics are well represented among the teaching and administrative staff of the schools they attend; offering opportunities for alternative educational strategies, such as self-directed learning and small-group work; integrating Hispanic culture and cultural awareness into educational programs; and ensuring that there are capable leaders in schools who are skilled at building linkages with other stakeholders in the community (Santiago & Brown, 2004).

Provide intensive support to students from immigrant families. For students from immigrant families, staying on track for high school graduation can be especially challenging. In 2007, 21 percent of children spoke a language other than English at home and 20 percent of children in immigrant families had difficulty speaking English (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009). Evidence-based educational services geared to English-language learners are therefore a key to dropout prevention. Moreover, children in immigrant families are less likely than other children to live with well educated parents. More than one-quarter (26 percent) of children in immigrant families live with parents who did not graduate from high school, and half of those children (13 percent) live with parents who have less than a ninth-grade education (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009). Students would benefit if parents had access to translation services at their children's schools, as well as access to adult education and English as a Second Language programs.

Investigate the potential of providing incentives for students to stay in school. Some states link drivers' licenses and work permits for teens to school attendance (Bost & Klare). In recent years, researchers and educators have proposed a range of other incentive programs for students, parents and teachers, from establishing an incentive fund for school districts interested in launching innovative programs to stem the dropout rate and higher pay for teachers who work in high-poverty schools to cash incentives for students who stay in school. Continued research is needed in this area (Bishop, 2006).

Focus intensively on dropout prevention for high school students with disabilities and other special needs. Because different states take different approaches to exit requirements for students with disabilities, data on special education graduation and dropout rates can be hard to interpret. Researchers agree, however, that students in special education (especially those with emotional/behavioral disabilities) drop out at substantially higher rates than students in general education (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). Over the past 15 years, as standards-based education has taken hold, states have experimented with a variety of high school diploma options for students with and without disabilities. Since 2004, 28 states increased their requirements for graduating from high school with a standard diploma for students both with and without disabilities, and some states report that one result was a rise in dropout rates (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2007). States have taken varied approaches to including students with disabilities in their efforts to raise standards. Those 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? Research is needed to determine how states' diverse approaches will affect graduation rates and employment outcomes for students with disabilities and other special needs (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2007).

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

A caring adult can act as a personal anchor, helping high school students stay on track (Hupfeld, 2007). The adults in a school community can mentor students, offer emotional support during hard times by acting as the student's advocate when conflict arises in school or at home, or provide opportunities to pursue a special talent or interest. They often benefit from guidance and support as they take on these roles.

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. While information about teen issues is widely available in books and on the Internet, relatively little attention has been paid to supporting the parents of adolescents. Providing increased access to parent education and family support programs can help parents negotiate conflicts or crises that can lead children to leave school. These programs need effective outreach, curricula, staff development, evaluation, and linkages with other local services.

Include strategies for helping at-risk youth stay on track in teacher education, leadership preparation, and professional development programs. To be effective, dropout prevention initiatives have to be aligned with districts' and schools' broader efforts at improvement and reform. For this reason, effective, informed leadership has long been seen as a critical factor in ensuring the success of dropout prevention efforts (Schargel, Thacker & Bell, 2007; Dynarski & Gleason, 1999). Strategies for working with at-risk youth should also be infused in teacher education coursework and fieldwork as well as ongoing professional development offerings

Promote an understanding of the relationship between health and dropping out. Students' health can affect their likelihood of staying in school, but the opposite is also true. The more education that people have, they are likely to be healthier over the course of their lives. Data conclusively show that high school dropouts experience more and more serious health issues over their lifetimes. For example, people with less schooling are at greater risk of dying younger, smoking, being overweight and getting less exercise (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007).

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 policymakers,

health care and human services providers, religious leaders, advocates and others who are involved in the lives and well-being of adolescents.

In summary, more is known than ever before about the forces that help students stay on track or lead them to drop out of school. There is a great deal that states, school districts, and schools can do to bolster the holding power of high schools. Some important strategies focus on the roots of disengagement in early childhood and the elementary- and middle-school years; others key in on transition points, especially ninth grade; and still others address issues that affect students' persistence across the high school years. There is much more that can be done, starting with clarifying what a dropout is and how the dropout phenomenon is best measured so that early warning and accountability systems can be put into place. Dropout prevention strategies need to address both school-level and community-level issues. Effective efforts will reflect not only risk factors, but also the factors that foster resiliency and help students stay on track despite difficulties.

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Online resources

Alliance for Excellent Education.

www.all4ed.org

America's Promise Alliance

www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Dropout-Prevention.aspx

American Youth Policy Forum

www.aypf.org

Center for Labor Market Studies

www.clms.neu.edu

National Association of State Boards of Education

www.nasbe.org

National Center on Educational Outcomes

www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO

National Center on Secondary Education Transitions

www.ncset.org

National Dropout Prevention Centers

<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/>

National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities

www.ndpc-sd.org/

National High School Center at the American Institutes of Research

www.betterhighschools.org/