

Improving High School Graduation Rates

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UPCOMING POLICY BRIEFS . .

- ✓ *Arguments and Evidence: The Debate over Collective Bargaining's Role in Public Education*
- ✓ *The Research on Single-Sex Classrooms*
- ✓ *The Research on Multi-Age Classrooms*

INTRODUCTION

On May 9, 2008, the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy (CEEP) issued the Education Policy Brief, *Calculating High School Graduation Rates*. In that report the importance of accurate and reliable high school graduation data was considered, various graduation rate calculation methods and the history behind the use of particular methodologies were examined, and the strong nationwide trend towards the use of a cohort tracking system was discussed. Additionally, the policy brief highlighted the value of a high school diploma both to the graduating individual and to his or her community.

The *Diplomas Count 2008* report asserts that 6,829 students are lost from high schools in the United States each day; Indiana alone is responsible for 127 of those students.¹ “Loss” in the context of the *Diplomas Count 2008* report is defined as students failing to graduate with a standard high school diploma within four years. For these dropout students, the financial impact of their decision will be significant as adults. In February 2007, the Alliance for Excellence in Education published a report indicating that “households headed by a high school graduate accumulate ten times more wealth than households headed by a high school dropout.”²

In this brief, “Improving High School Graduation Rates,” the significance of high school dropout trends is further addressed and programs which aim to

prevent students from leaving school before graduation are summarized. First, we examine characteristics of those who drop out of high school and the reasons they discontinue their schooling early. The brief will then highlight direct intervention programs, efforts which are primarily aimed at reaching at-risk students and helping them through school. Finally, holistic, school-wide reform efforts and their connection to dropout prevention will be considered.

WHO IS DROPPING OUT?

A large body of research indicates that students from particular backgrounds or who possess particular characteristics are more likely to drop out than others. In particular, minority students and students from low-income families are less likely to complete high school than their peers. The cumulative graduation rate in Indiana for the 2006-07 school year was 76 percent. However, graduation rates were lowest in urban and rural areas with high concentrations of poverty. Moreover, while Caucasian students had an average graduation rate of 80 percent, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students had graduation rates of 57, 63, and 70 percent, respectively.³

This graduation disparity among students from differing socio-economic and demographic backgrounds is also reflected at the national level.⁴ The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) estimated that the overall national graduation rate in 2001 was 70

percent. In 2001, Caucasian and Asian students had the highest graduation rates at 72 and 79 percent respectively; according to the NDPC only 54 percent of Native American students, 51 percent of African American students, and 52 percent of Hispanic students graduated high school that year.⁵ A study by the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET) at the University of Minnesota found that students with limited English-speaking skills and/or parents with high levels of mobility are also at high risk of dropping out of school, as are students with a history of behavior problems.⁶ Additionally, NCSET noted that males are more likely than females to drop out of high school, and students in larger high schools are at a higher risk of leaving school than students in smaller high schools.⁶

These results [from Johns Hopkins University] suggest that a dedicated application of resources could lower dropout rates; they also indicate that the dropout crisis is not merely a social phenomenon and that school-based solutions can positively impact graduation rates.

A study conducted by Balfanz & Legters (2004) at the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University found that schools with the lowest levels of promotion (from freshmen to senior status) were not necessarily schools with the high levels of minority students. Rather, schools with the weakest promotion power—the rate at which a high school is able to advance students through grade levels and to graduation—were schools with high levels of poverty

and a lack of resources. According to their report, *Locating the Dropout Crisis*, “Majority minority schools with more resources successfully promote students to senior status at the same rate as majority white schools.”⁸ These results suggest that a dedicated application of resources could lower dropout rates; they also indicate that the dropout crisis is not merely a social phenomenon and that school-based solutions can positively impact graduation rates.

WHY ARE STUDENTS DROPPING OUT?

Relationships, relevance, and rigor are known as the new three R’s of education reform. These foundational premises assert the importance that students must feel a part of the school community and have a strong relationship with one or more adults in the school. Secondly, the students must understand that what they are learning is connected, i.e., is relevant, to something larger than the present time and place. And thirdly, students must be challenged intellectually by a rigorous curriculum. Research consistently indicates that a lack of at least one of these factors plays a large role in a student’s decision to leave school. While some students indicate leaving high school for personal reasons such as financial hardship, becoming a parent, or caring for another member of their family, these same students also indicate that they may have stayed if they had received more support from adults in the school, bolstering the premise that strong school relationships are a key component of improving graduation rates.⁹

Relationships

The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) studies the levels of student engagement of over 80,000 high school students across the nation. HSSSE is administered to high school students still in school and thus can provide a benchmark for measuring relationships. A total of 78 percent of

respondents agreed that there was at least one adult in their school who cared about them and knew them well. The study also found that students feel the highest level of support from their teachers (81 percent), but conversely the students feel the lowest level of support from administrators (60 percent).¹⁰ In a study conducted for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, *The Silent Epidemic - Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, researchers worked solely with students who had left high school early and found that only 56 percent of students had felt they could go to a school staff member about school problems. Only 41 percent felt they could go to a staff member about personal problems.¹¹ While all students need to feel as if they are cared about and that their presence in school is valued, this is particularly true for students already at risk for dropping out.

Relevance

It is no secret that in this 21st century world many schools still conduct classes in a 19th century fashion. Many facets of education in America have changed little over the past few centuries; most schools still operate on an agrarian schedule, classrooms are still usually composed of rows of individual desks facing forward, and passive learning remains the norm. As a result, many students report feeling as if their high school education is not connected to their post-secondary future. In *The Silent Epidemic*, the authors report that four out of five students said they thought school needed more real-world learning experiences and/or experimental learning opportunities.¹² HSSSE asked students why they attend school and most of them (73 percent) responded that it was because they wanted to get a degree and go to college or because of their peers and friends (68 percent). Relatively few students indicated that they went because they enjoy school (34 percent) or because of what they learn in school (39 percent).¹³ Furthermore, 75 percent of HSSSE respondents said they have been bored in school because the material they were learning was not interesting and 39 percent said they have been bored because the material was not

relevant to them. Students recognize that high school is one step to achieving their larger goals, but many students fail to see that step itself as a valuable academic experience. A study by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), which profiled nine high schools that have improved graduation rates, found that all nine of the high schools have implemented programs which emphasize the connections between high school and college and careers.¹⁴

Rigor

Although it is clear that many students who drop out were struggling academically, they do not necessarily do so because school was too difficult. Rather, surveys of high school dropouts suggest the opposite. According to *The Silent Epidemic*, a study by Bridgeland et. al., 35 percent of students said they were failing one or more courses when they dropped out, but 43 percent of students also said that they had missed too many days of school and could not catch up.¹⁵ These numbers suggest that many students were not failing simply due to a lack of ability, but rather a lack of attendance. A possible explanation for chronic absenteeism can be found in other responses: 69 percent of those same students said their classes had been uninspiring, and 80 percent said they did one hour or less of homework per night. Finally, 67 percent said they would have worked harder had it been expected of them, and 70 percent said they were capable of graduating had they tried.¹⁶ HSSSE results reveal a similar sentiment among current high school students: two out of three students are bored in school at least once a day, and 32 percent said the work was not challenging enough.

GRADUAL DISENGAGEMENT

Studies have revealed that the decision to leave their schooling is not a sudden one for high school students; rather, dropouts experience a gradual process whereby they fail to form meaningful relationships, become disengaged in school, and

feel unchallenged. In fact, one study found that 60 percent of future dropouts could be identified as early as Grade 6, at which point students who were failing either English or math or both, attending school less than 80 percent of the time, or had received at least one out-of-school suspension were likely to drop out later in their schooling.¹⁷ Additionally, the study noted that students with only mild but repeated behavior problems should also be considered at risk because these instances of not paying attention, not completing assignments, and talking back in class are signs of early disengagement.¹⁸

One study found that 60 percent of future dropouts could be identified as early as Grade 6

Other studies have found that the transition between middle and high school is a critical point at which many future dropouts are lost. A study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that students who have obtained a sufficient number of credits to be considered “on track” to graduate by the end of Grade 9 are far more likely to actually graduate high school than those students who have already fallen behind by this point.¹⁹ A study conducted at the University of Michigan found that the rigor of math courses correlates with dropout rates; 18 percent of students who dropped out had taken no math during their first two years of high school.²⁰ Additionally, school attendance is a heavy predictor of risk level.²¹ Students with poor attendance demonstrate disengagement from the school community; these students are likely to fall far behind in coursework

and feel overwhelmed by the volume of make-up work necessary to remain on track with their peers. Also, it should be remembered that this transition is a crucial relationship-building time; as noted earlier, students who fail to make connections with adults in the school community are more likely to feel unconnected to the community and leave.

Prior to dropping out of high school, students have usually exhibited an array of warning signs, including falling significantly behind in credit completion, chronic absenteeism, lack of enrollment in clubs and/or sports, and failing standardized tests. Students exhibiting these signs feel overwhelmed by how far they have dropped behind their peers and, thus, decide to leave school. In addition, the HSSSE report concludes that there is an “engagement gap” that schools need to pay attention to: females are more likely to be engaged in school than their male counterparts, white and Asian students report more engagement than other racial ethnic groups, and students who are not eligible for free/reduced-price lunch are more engaged than students who are eligible.²² Even before students leave school, their likelihood of dropping out can be assessed in terms of their engagement with the school community. Bridging this “engagement gap” could be critical to preventing students from dropping out of school.

DIRECT INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Although a great deal of research has been done to evaluate which students drop out and why they do so, the research addressing which programs are most effective at keeping students in school is less established. What is clear, however, is that schools must work to implement the three R’s directly within both the immediate at-risk population and the student body at large. These direct intervention programs, aimed first at students most at risk of dropping out, can take vastly different forms, ranging from alternative schools to mentor programs within the normal school setting.

Alternative Education

Alternative education experienced a period of intense growth in the 1970s and continues to be a viable option for students today. Students served by schools offering alternative programs are varied, but alternative education is often noted to work with students considered at-risk to not graduate in a traditional environment. The alternative program may exist as a school-within-a-school, a separate entity, or as an after-school program. Moreover, the ways in which alternative education is funded and administered vary widely from state to state. In the 2000-01 school year, there were approximately 11,000 alternative schools and over 600,000 students attending alternative schools in the U.S.²² The Indiana Department of Education Web site offers that the 291 alternative education programs across the state exist specifically to address the needs of at-risk students. The Web site also outlines several state requirements for alternative schools. For instance, the maximum teacher-to-student ratio is 1:15. Additionally, alternative programs in Indiana must have a small student base, clearly defined mission and discipline codes, and high expectations of its students.²³ The research regarding the function, form, and efficacy of alternative education in Indiana and nationwide is vast, and the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy will explore alternative education as an independent topic in an upcoming

Education Policy Brief. It is important to note here, however, that alternative programs have been used as a means of addressing the needs of at-risk students for over three decades.

Incentive/Disincentive Programs

In an attempt to dissuade students from dropping out, many states have enacted punitive laws such as the revocation of a student's driver's license and/or work permit if the student drops out of school without a legally acceptable reason (such as financial hardship or illness). According to the Education Commission of the States (ECS), 27 states currently implement sanctions on driving privileges connected to student attendance and/or behavior. Individual states determine the requirements, which include, for example, that students remain in school (do not drop out), have satisfactory attendance, adequately progress through school at a reasonable pace, and do not have behavior problems (suspensions, expulsions, etc.). Indiana's law established by HEA 1794 in 2005 states that "a driver's license or a learner's permit will not be issued to an individual under 18 who is considered a habitual truant, is under at least a second suspension from school for the year, is under expulsion from school, or has withdrawn from school, for a reason other than financial hardship."²⁵ That same law also prevents dropouts from obtaining a work permit.

ECS researchers noted, however, that legislators should be sure to clearly define "habitually truant" and that students should not be prevented from attending driver's education.²⁶ For a list of states which connect driving privileges to academics, see Table 1.

Another program aimed at preventing dropouts directly targets teen parents. Some states have created assistance programs that provide financial bonuses and support for teen parents who choose to complete school. These programs condition the support on continued attendance, performance, and completion. The U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse found that this type of financial incentive had a positive effect on keeping students in school.²⁷

Mentoring/Monitoring Programs

Mentoring programs are a popular strategy to help students make important academic transitions and build relationships with teachers and administrators. Theoretically, students who were at risk would be identified on the basis of many of the indicators mentioned earlier (absenteeism, grades, socio-economic status, behavioral problems, etc.) and these students would be paired with a counselor, teacher, or administrator with whom they meet regularly. This mentor would make sure the student felt valued and comfortable in their new environment. Additionally, the mentor would monitor the student's progress academically and step in to address problems with the student. The Check & Connect Model, developed at the University of Minnesota, is one model that employs the mentor/monitoring system. The program places heavy emphasis on relationships with both the student and the parents.²⁸ The What Works Clearinghouse found that the Check & Connect Model had potentially positive effects in keeping students in school and helping students to progress through school.²⁹ A mentoring/monitoring program could easily be created or replicated on either a small or a large scale.

TABLE 1. States with Sanctions on Driving Privileges

Alabama	Iowa	Oklahoma
Arkansas	Kansas	Oregon
California	Kentucky	Rhode Island
Delaware	Louisiana	South Carolina
Florida	Mississippi	Tennessee
Georgia	Nevada	Texas
Idaho	New Mexico	Virginia
Illinois	North Carolina	Wisconsin
Indiana	Ohio	West Virginia

Source: www.ecs.org

Policy Perspective

THE ROAD TO HIGHER GRADUATION RATES IS BUILT ON ENGAGING ALL STUDENTS

Ethan Yazzie-Mintz



I can't stress enough that we want to learn, but the focus at our school is not on knowledge nearly as much as it is on letter grades.

— HSSSE 2007 respondent

The academic and policy discussions about high school dropouts and graduation rates focus almost exclusively on adults' perceptions and beliefs about: students (their behavior, motivation, and attitudes), school structures, and potential reforms. As with so many reforms in education, the voices of those most affected by the reforms are left unheard. In fact, the keys to raising graduation rates lie in understanding the beliefs, thoughts, and feelings of the students themselves.

As difficult as it is to get an accurate picture of the graduation rate in high schools across the U.S., the more daunting—and critical—challenge is to *improve* graduation rates. Recent research paints a picture of a dropout problem so broad in scope and pervasive in nature as to make a solution seem nearly impossible.

Balfanz and Legters (2004) identify schools with particularly low graduation rates as “dropout factories,” asserting intentionality on the part of these schools in producing dropouts.¹ Swanson (2008) concludes that “graduating from high school in America’s largest cities amounts, essentially, to a coin toss,” suggesting there is randomness to the chances of a student graduating from high school in these cities.² The title of *Time* magazine’s cover story, “Dropout Nation” (Thornburgh, 2006), elevated dropping out to a national phenomenon, some kind of perverse fad.

Why won't they bring what we are learning to life?

— HSSSE 2007 respondent

Students from high schools across the country participating in the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) describe a culture of inattention to student views and inaction on student recommendations. The most prevalent response provided to the open-response question at the end of the survey expresses this sentiment: “I do not believe anyone will read this and actually care.”

Two-thirds of HSSSE respondents are bored at least every day (if not every class), more than 20% of respondents have considered dropping out for a variety of reasons, and more than 40% disagree with the statement, “I am an important part of my high school community”; in this context, it is imperative that students’ voices begin to play a more significant role in reforms and restructuring.

There are five action steps that schools and districts can take to begin to engage all students on the road to improving graduation rates.

Step 1: *Know what the students think.* Not based on what we as adults assume students think, but based on what students themselves say. Talk to students, survey students, create focus groups to avoid the mismatch between the perceptions of adults and the attitudes of students.

Step 2: *Believe what students say and care about what students think.* I often get asked, by both researchers and practitioners, “Can we really trust what students say?”, suggesting that students’ words are not to be believed. Schools that take students seriously will get more serious students.

Step 3: *Set a clear purpose for education in the school, and be sure that this purpose is enacted by everybody in the school community.* Often schools point to their agreed-upon mission statement as the purpose for education; however, if the words and mission aren’t matched by structures and actions, the first ones to notice will be the students, who are likely to dis-engage.

Step 4: *Create structures and processes that meet the learning needs of the students, not just the needs of the adults.* Decisions in schools are generally made by adults for students. An engaging school will ensure that students are a part of decision-making processes and that structures are continually refined to meet the learning needs of all students.

Step 5: *Engage all students deeply and equally.* There is a persistent and pernicious engagement gap that mirrors the achievement gap. Students are reporting differential levels of engagement by gender, race/ethnicity, academic track, eligibility for free/reduced lunch, and length of time in the school. To begin to address improvement in graduation rates, all students must be engaged deeply and equally.

I always wished at least one teacher would see a skill in me that seemed extraordinary, or help to encourage its growth.

— HSSSE 2007 respondent

Students are asking to be challenged, engaged, interacted with, and valued. Engaging schools will produce graduates ready for the rigors of postsecondary education and the world of work—schools we may ultimately be able to call “graduate factories.”

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¹ Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. (2004). *Locating the dropout crisis*. XXX, NY: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, Johns Hopkins University.

² Swanson, C. B. (2008). *Cities in crisis: A special analytic report on high school graduation*. Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center.

Another mentoring program is the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. Rather than connecting at-risk students to faculty members, the program encourages at-risk students in high school to bond with and tutor at-risk students in elementary school. Created in 1984, the program was originally focused on individual school districts in the San Antonio, Texas, area. However, the program has since expanded and is being replicated nationally. The program is centered on the beliefs that all students can learn and all students are valuable; the hope is that both the mentor and mentee of the program will realize their self-worth and feel purposeful. Researchers found that the students enrolled in the program had lower dropout rates than comparison groups.³⁰

In Indianapolis, Indiana, a new mentor-based program was recently announced. The Common Goal Initiative is a partnership between 11 Marion County school districts and the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce which aims to raise graduation rates in the area to at least 80 percent by 2011. Most of the schools participating in the program currently have graduation rates at or below 70 percent.³¹ The program is predominantly mentor-based, giving students identified as at-risk one-on-one guidance and support. Additionally, the program helps students with credit recovery and provides social services as needed. Funding for the program has been donated from many local businesses and foundations, including the Pacers Foundation, which gave \$500,000 in June 2008.³²

Remediation

As mentioned above, many students drop out because they feel overwhelmed by how far they have fallen behind in the number of classes missed and their lack of course completion credits. In their study of schools improving graduation rates, Bottoms and Anthony at SREB found that successful high schools had formalized extra-help sessions for struggling students in their school and had

also implemented credit recovery programs.³³ Researchers note that it is important to not weaken the standards but, rather, to strengthen them. Such programs allow educators to identify at-risk students and then give students hope for a timely graduation.

As previously noted, high school freshmen are at increased risk if they are already behind in course work or do not make a successful transition into high school. In order to address such issues some high schools have mandated double-dosing of mathematics and English/language arts courses for struggling ninth-graders.³⁴ In this arrangement, students who are not proficient in either reading or math spend twice the amount of time in those courses than normally prescribed; this extra time is usually in place of an elective course. Using this format enables students who may have been unprepared for high school level coursework to catch up to their peers. Schools can identify students in need of such remediation by using Grade 8 standardized examinations, grades, and teacher recommendations.

In-School Academies

Other high schools have focused on the entire freshmen cohort rather than just struggling freshmen. Freshmen centers or academies have been established in some of the successful high schools highlighted by the SREB.³⁵ These academies allow freshmen to remain with each other and the same set of teachers for the duration of the school year, thus strengthening relationships between individual students and the students and educators. Bottoms and Anthony note that this academy format has also been used at a school with a large Spanish-speaking population. In this school all ESL students participate together in double-doses of English and Algebra I. The school has found that this community bonding and intensive coursework has reduced Algebra I failures by 22 percent.³⁶

The career academy model has also shown promise. Career academies have

existed in the American education system since 1969 when they were first implemented in Philadelphia.³⁷ Presently, NCSET estimates that there are between 2,000 and 3,000 career academies nationwide. The basic concept of the program is to structure small classes with both academic and technical focuses around a particular career field. Included in the program is the progression of classes with a cohort, the integration of outside experience, and regular field trips and guest speakers.³⁸ This type of program is intended to connect with students because of its real-world relevance. The What Works Clearinghouse found that career academies have the potential to keep students in school and progressing through school.³⁹

However, contrary to the What Works Clearinghouse findings, a recent study by Manpower Research Demonstration Research Corporation suggests that career academies do help boost future earnings, but do not prevent dropouts or raise academic achievement while students are in school. These conflicting findings indicate that more research on the outcomes of career academies is necessary.⁴⁰

ALAS Program

Another program highlighted for its focus on Latino students is the Achievement for Latinos Through Academic Success (ALAS) program. The program was first funded through the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs in 1990. The core of the program is an emphasis on increased problem-solving training, counseling, and relationship-building between the students of the program and faculty mentors.⁴¹ The students enrolled in the program take blocks of classes together as a way to foster community. Additionally, an open line of communication between the faculty mentor, the student, and the parents is viewed as a key to success. The What Works Clearinghouse noted that the program had positive effects, such as keeping students in school and helping them to progress

through school.⁴² The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition noted that “program participants had lower rates of absenteeism, lower percentages of failed classes, and a higher proportion of credits (on track to graduate) when compared to nonparticipants.”⁴³

SCHOOL-WIDE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE THREE R’S

While programs which target at-risk students and populations are essential in preventing dropouts and improving the overall graduation rate of a school, there is also a need for a shift in school-wide programs and philosophies. No school

can be entirely successful in improving graduation rates without a strong focus on relationships, relevance, and rigor.

In 2006, Indiana legislators decided to tackle the dropout crisis within the state and the result was several pieces of promising legislation, including House Enrolled Act 1347-2006. One provision of the bill requires an annual review of the student career plan,⁴⁴ in which each student sits down at least once a year with a counselor or some other knowledgeable educator and discusses their current academic progress and future plans. If implemented successfully this approach would give schools the opportunity to reinforce to each individual student the value of their future. It also has the potential to create a relationship

between the student and the educator that would be more lasting than the once per year meeting. HEA 1347-2006 also addresses the issue of rigor. The Double-Up for College program portion of the bill requires that high schools must offer at least two dual credit courses and two AP courses.⁴⁵ This allows high school students to experience college-level work and receive college credit while still in high school. Additionally, a tuition waiver is provided to low-income students so that lack of personal finances is not a deterrent. Another effort to increase the rigor of high schools in Indiana was Public Law 105-2005, which eliminated the general diploma in Indiana and established Core 40 as the default curriculum.⁴⁶ For more details on

TABLE 2. Strategies for Improving High School Graduation Rates Nationwide and in Indiana

Strategy	# of States with Program	State Program Example	Implementation in Indiana
Increasing the legal dropout age	18	New Mexico sets “high school graduate” as the only acceptable age for leaving high school; there are exemptions for 17-year-olds with demonstrated financial hardship and gainful employment.	Legal dropout age in Indiana is 18; student may withdraw at age 16 with permission of parents and principal (conditional on financial hardship) [HEA 1794-2005]
Driving sanctions	27	Tennessee conditions driving privileges on attendance requirements and student behavior (as does Indiana), but also on satisfactory progress through high school or GED course.	Driver’s license not permitted for students who are habitually truant, or on second suspension from school, or on expulsion from school, or to students who have left school before age 18 without demonstrating financial hardship [HEA 1794-2005]
Alternative education	50	Arkansas passed legislation requiring every school and district to provide and recommend when necessary alternative education; an Arkansas Pygmalion Commission on Nontraditional Education was created to focus on changes in school climate for at-risk students [AC 6-15-1005]	Alternative education programs in Indiana which meet the definition per Indiana legislation are eligible to receive an additional \$750 per enrolled student [IC 20-20-33]
Career academies	47	California Partnership Academies are models which group students Grades 10-12 with teachers and other students and focus on both college preparation and a career theme; the academies have been proven to improve attendance, graduation, and college matriculation rates [AB 3104-1983, SB 605-1087, SB 44-1993]	School Flex allows students in Grades 11 and 12 to enroll in career education or work at place of employment during the school day [HEA 1794-2005]; funding formula for technical education rewards enrollment in high-demand areas of employment
Dual enrollment/credit	38	The Post-Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) in Colorado requires high schools to inform students of their right to take at least one course up to a full load at a local college or university and received dual credit; the state is responsible for tuition	Double-Up for college program requires IN high schools to offer minimum of 2 AP courses and 2 dual credit courses; students eligible for free and reduced lunch receive tuition waivers [HEA 1347-2006]
Career/college counseling	30	North Carolina legislation inserts “dropout prevention” into the description for the job of high school guidance counselor [SB 571- 2006]	Annual review of student career plan required; counseling on credit recovery must be offered to students not on track to graduate [HEA 1347-2006]

the legislation passed to deter high school dropouts in Indiana, see Table 2.

In *The Silent Epidemic*, dropouts suggested to researchers that they would prefer smaller classes where more interaction with fellow students and the instructor was possible.⁴⁷ The annual survey report by HSSSE echoes similar findings: students were most excited in the classroom when they were engaged in interactive learning with their peers.⁴⁸ Some of the highest ranked activities included discussions/debates, group projects, presentations, and role playing. Students ranked teacher lecture as the least engaging form of learning; however, this passive instructional method still permeates many American classrooms. Acknowledging the views and opinions of students is a necessary step towards preventing dropouts and ensuring academic success (see Policy Perspective on page 5).

While programs which target at-risk students and populations are essential in preventing dropouts and improving the overall graduation rate of a school, there is also a need for a shift in school-wide programs and philosophies.

Project-Based Learning

Responding to student reports and related research, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation supported the development of a new type of high school which would do away with traditional passive learning techniques and instead center on collaboration and projects. The result was the New Tech High School model, in which schools address the need for a new type of interactive learning. The schools are small communities without the traditional arrangement of desks and blackboards; rather, the school tends to be set-up more like a place of business with offices and corridors for group work. There is a 1:1 ratio of computers to students and the school work is project-based. Textbooks are not regularly used in the school, and teachers act more as facilitators of projects because learning is student-driven and not teacher-driven. Students for the 27 schools currently in operation are chosen through a lottery system and many of the students are ethnic minorities and/or qualify for free/reduced priced lunch. There will be six New Tech High Schools operating in Indiana during the 2008-09 school year. Yet, despite having students who would normally be considered at-risk, New Tech High Schools graduate nearly 100 percent of their students and nine out of ten students attend a college or university following high school. The collegiate matriculation rates of the New Tech High School model suggest that the transition to new types of education can be done successfully.⁴⁹

First Things First

The First Things First initiative began in Kansas City, Kansas, and currently operates in 70 schools in nine districts across the nation. The comprehensive school reform model places heavy emphasis on the three R's for academic success. The model has three main components: first, a small community of up to 350 students; secondly, a family advocate system pairs each student with a staff member; and

finally, there are efforts to align the curricula with state and local standards and increase the strength of the curriculum.⁵⁰ Some reviews of the program noted substantial improvements in attendance rates, graduation rates, and performance and standardized examinations.⁵¹ Not all reviews of the program have found consistently positive results, however, and more studies are needed.

AMERICA'S PROMISE ALLIANCE

Many of the principles of the three R's can be seen in the five ingredients for success listed by America's Promise Alliance. Born out of President Clinton's Summit for America's Future in 1997, America's Promise Alliance (APA) was originally chaired by retired General Colin Powell and is currently chaired by his wife, Alma Powell. The organization hopes to reach 15 million disadvantaged youth by 2010. The five ingredients to success include caring adults, safe places, healthy starts (proper nutrition), effective education, and opportunities to serve others.⁵² Three of the promises, as they are referred to by the organization—caring adults, effective education, and opportunities to serve others—can be directly linked to relationships, rigor, and relevance. Yet, made obvious by the complementary promises, APA believes that students must feel safe in their academic environment and must have access to quality nutrition and healthcare in order for success to be achieved. Part of the APA's mission is to facilitate cooperation among educators, research centers, and policymakers so that various entities can come together to provide solid support to at-risk students. In pursuit of this goal, the APA is hosting summits in all 50 states to raise awareness and a sense of urgency. The Indianapolis Dropout Prevention Leadership Summit will be co-convened by the United Way of Central Indiana and the Indiana Youth Institute on November 18, 2008, at the University of Indianapolis. The summit in Indiana will bring together multiple organizations and state entities in the hopes of improving local and statewide graduation rates.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

There are clear populations of students who are considered to be at high risk of dropping out of school. These students most often are minority, low-income, ESL, have parents with high mobility, chronically absent, and/or have consistently exhibited mild to severe behavioral problems.

Recommendation

Educators should establish programs which identify at-risk and struggling students early, ideally in middle school or no later than the student's freshman year of high school. Multiple avenues for addressing at-risk students are possible including partnering students with a mentor/monitor and enrolling students in remediation. The key is that these students are identified before they fall too far behind their peers.

Conclusion

Relationships, relevance, and rigor are known as the new three R's of education reform. These foundational premises assert that students must feel they are a part of the community and have a strong relationship with one or more adults in the school, must feel as if what they are learning is connected to something larger than the present time and place, and must be challenged intellectually. Every study reviewed for this brief indicated that a lack of at least one of these factors played a large role in a student's decision to leave school.

Recommendation

The three R's are components of an overall philosophy of education that must be embraced by individual schools so that they encourage the principles among all of the teachers and staff in the school community. State legislation, such as the

laws enacted in Indiana, help to encourage large-scale change, but for true change to occur these ideas must be embraced at the level of individual communities.

Conclusion

A majority of students responding to the HSSSE survey said that they were bored at least once every day. A total of 75 percent of respondents said that the material they are learning in high school is not interesting and 39 percent said it was not relevant to them. Students overwhelmingly indicated preferences for interactive learning methods that run contrary to traditional lecture-style classrooms. At the end of the HSSSE survey, when the students are presented with an open-ended question, many students felt as if their comments and suggestions would go unheard and/or be ignored.

Recommendation

It is impossible to improve student satisfaction in education without listening to students first. Student input should be highly regarded and responses should be formed accordingly. Despite prevalent stereotypes, most students in surveys have indicated a desire for more challenging academic work. The Southern Regional Board of Education noted that of the successful high schools profiled, most raised expectations and were still succeeding in improving graduation rates; students rose to meet the higher expectations.

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Web Resources

America's Promise Alliance

<http://www.americaspromise.org/APA.htm>

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: Education

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/UnitedStates/Education/TransformingHighSchools/>

High School Survey of Student Engagement

<http://www.ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/>

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education: Indiana's High School Dropout Crisis

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education: Indiana's High School Dropout Crisis

<http://www.che.state.in.us/dropout.htm>

New Technology Foundation

<http://www.newtechfoundation.org/index.html>

High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE)

The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) is a research and professional development project directed by the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy at Indiana University. The project has three primary purposes: (1) to help high schools explore, understand, and strengthen student engagement, (2) to work with high school teachers and administrators on utilizing survey data to improve practices, and (3) to conduct rigorous research on issues of student engagement.

HSSSE investigates deeply the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs that students have about their work, the school learning environment, and their interaction with the school community. Over the last four years, more than 300,000 students in approximately 40 states have taken the survey. The data from the survey help schools explore the causes and conditions that lead to student success or failure, engagement or “dis-engagement,” persistence or dropping out. HSSSE data are important in guiding both immediate action on school improvement initiatives and long-term planning of larger reforms, providing insight into ways of reaching every student, raising achievement, and strengthening teaching and learning in high schools.

For more information on how to participate in this survey to improve K-12 student engagement, visit the HSSSE website:
<http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/>

Contact HSSSE project staff directly at:
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