

School Dropouts: Prevention Considerations, Interventions, and Challenges

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ABSTRACT—*Preventing school dropout and promoting successful graduation is a national concern that poses a significant challenge for schools and educational communities working with youth at risk for school failure. Although students who are at greatest risk for dropping out of school can be identified, they disengage from school and drop out for a variety of reasons for which there is no one common solution. The most effective intervention programs identify and track youth at risk for school failure, maintain a focus on students' progress toward educational standards across the school years, and are designed to address indicators of student engagement and to impact enrollment status—not just the predictors of dropout. To leave no child behind, educators must address issues related to student mobility, alternate routes to school completion, and alternate time lines for school completion, as well as engage in rigorous evaluation of school-completion programs.*

KEYWORDS—*dropout; graduation; at-risk; engagement*

No one questions the seriousness of the school-dropout problem in the United States. Attention to graduation and dropout rates has increased significantly, and is reflected in current federal priorities. Most recently, graduation rate has been targeted in Title I of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which identifies schools as needing improvement if their overall performance does not improve from year to year or if subgroups, including students who need to learn English and youth with disabilities, do not make adequate yearly progress. Along with test performance, graduation rate, defined as the percentage of ninth graders receiving a standard diploma in 4 years, is a required indicator in calculations of adequate yearly progress for high schools.

Thousands of American youth are school dropouts, with an estimated 1 in 8 children never graduating from high school. In fact, high school graduation rates have not changed significantly since 1990

(National Educational Goals Panel, 2002). The startling statistic that one high school student drops out every 9 seconds illustrates the magnitude of the problem (Children's Defense Fund, 2002).

Most states are far from the 90% graduation rate that was targeted in the early 1990s (National Educational Goals Panel, 2002). Furthermore, students with disabilities are much more likely to drop out of school than their general-education peers. Also, dropout rates are disproportionately high for students from Hispanic, African American, Native American, and low-income backgrounds; students who live in single-parent homes; and those who attend large urban schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Dropout rates are highest among students with emotional and behavioral disabilities; half of these students dropped out of school in 1998–1999 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Although these marker variables identify students who may be at risk for dropout, predicting who will drop out is not foolproof. For example, in a study of middle and high school dropout-prevention programs for students with two or more risk factors, no single risk factor predicted who would drop out (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

Dropout statistics are particularly alarming because jobs that pay living wages and benefits have virtually disappeared for youth without a high school diploma. For society, the costs of dropout are staggering, estimated in the billions of dollars in lost revenues, welfare programs, unemployment programs, underemployment, and crime prevention and prosecution (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Hurley, 2000). Given these individual and societal consequences, facilitating school completion for all students must be a critical concern for researchers, policymakers, and educators across the country.

Promoting successful school completion for students who are at risk of dropping out is recognized as especially challenging in light of current national reform efforts to achieve high academic standards, end social promotion, and ratchet up educational accountability. The need for schools and the broader educational community to create opportunities for success and to provide necessary supports for all youth to meet educational standards is complicated by requirements in many states that students must pass state high school exit exams to earn a standard diploma. Although these exams may ensure that students have attained specific competencies prior to receiving a diploma, a potential unintended consequence is increases in the number of students who drop out.

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CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN DROPOUT PREVENTION

Educators designing dropout-prevention programs will want to attend to five critical considerations: dropout as a process, the role of context, alterable variables, an orientation toward completion and engagement, and the importance of empirical evidence.

Dropout as a Process

Early and sustained intervention is integral to the success of students because the decision to leave school without graduating is not an instantaneous one, but rather a process that occurs over many years. Teaching students to read is vital for them to become engaged learners. Research shows that leaving school early is the outcome of a long process of disengagement from school (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001); dropout is preceded by indicators of withdrawal (e.g., poor attendance) or unsuccessful school experiences (e.g., academic or behavioral difficulties) that often begin in elementary school. Overt indicators of disengagement are generally accompanied by feelings of alienation, a poor sense of belonging, and a general dislike for school.

The Role of Context

The problem of school dropout cannot be understood in isolation from contextual factors. Early school withdrawal reflects a complex interplay among student, family, school, and community variables, as well as risk and protective factors. School and family policies and practices are critical (Christenson et al., 2000). For example, schools with the greatest holding power tend to have relatively small enrollment, fair discipline policies, caring teachers, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Policies that support suspension and grade retention for students who are deemed not ready to advance have been linked to higher dropout rates. Family factors associated with reduced dropout rates include parental support, monitoring and supervision, high regard for education, and positive expectations regarding school performance.

Alterable Variables

The dichotomy between predictors that are more versus less easy to influence provides a suggested course of action for educators. Finn (1989) made an important distinction when he contrasted *status* predictor variables such as socioeconomic status, which educators have little ability to change, and *behavioral* or alterable predictor variables such as out-of-school suspensions and course failures, which are more readily influenced by educators. Recently, there has been a shift toward investigating alterable variables—behaviors and attitudes that reflect students' connection to school as well as family and school practices that support children's learning—because they have greater utility for interventions.

Completion and Engagement

School dropout and school completion are considered two sides of the same coin; however, school completion is the preferred term given its positive orientation and emphasis on the development of student competencies. School-completion programs require a primary focus on student engagement, particularly on finding ways to enhance students'

interest in and enthusiasm for school, sense of belonging at school, motivation to learn, and progress in school, as well as the value they place on school and learning (Christenson et al., 2001). Engagement is multidimensional (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, in press). *Academic and behavioral engagement* refers to observable indicators; sustained attention to and completion of academic work and accrual of credits exemplify academic engagement, and attendance, number of suspensions, and classroom participation are measures of behavioral engagement. *Cognitive and psychological engagement* refers to internal indicators; processing academic information, thinking about how to learn, and self-monitoring progress toward task completion exemplify cognitive engagement, and identification with school, a sense of belonging and connection, and positive relationships with peers and teachers characterize psychological engagement.

Conceptually, promoting school completion encompasses more than preventing dropout. For example, it is characterized by school personnel emphasizing development of students' competencies rather than dwelling on their deficits. Successful programs are comprehensive, interfacing family, school, and community efforts rather than offering a single, narrow intervention in one environment; are implemented over time rather than at a single period in time; and make an effort to tailor interventions to fit individual students rather than adopting a programmatic "one size fits all" orientation. School-completion programs have a longitudinal focus, aiming to promote a "good" outcome, not simply prevent a "bad" outcome for students and society (Christenson et al., 2001).

Empirical Evidence

Schools across the nation have implemented dropout-prevention programs. The National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University has studied the issue of dropout for nearly two decades and has developed a database cataloguing such programs (Schargel & Smink, 2001). Although these programs provide general guidelines and appear promising, continued empirical study is required to determine those variables that influence the effectiveness of interventions. However, despite the importance of school completion for individuals and society as a whole, and despite the complexity of the problem, few such studies have been published. A comprehensive review of dropout interventions (Lehr, Hanson, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003) indicated that dropout research has been overwhelmingly predictive or descriptive (i.e., there have been few controlled studies), and the methodology used to evaluate the effectiveness of the majority of dropout interventions has been judged to be of low quality or poor scientific merit. For example, many studies have not reported the statistical significance of results, and even fewer have reported effect sizes to help determine practical significance. Aptly, the need for more rigorous studies was highlighted in a recent report from the U.S. General Accounting Office (2002), which stated that "although there have been many federal, state, and local dropout prevention programs over the last 2 decades, few have been rigorously evaluated" (p. 31).

Currently, we know considerably more about who drops out than we do about efficacious intervention programs. Most interventions have been designed to remediate specific predictors of dropout, such as poor attendance and poor academic performance. Although research supports the idea that these variables should be targeted, there is little evidence to suggest that these programs change dropout rates (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). On a more optimistic note, there are promising

signs that comprehensive, personalized, long-term interventions yield positive results for students (e.g., Fashola & Slavin, 1998; Sinclair et al., in press).

INTERVENTIONS

What are the characteristics of school-based dropout-prevention interventions? An integrative review of 45 prevention and intervention studies addressing dropout or school completion, described in professional journals from 1983 through 2000 (Lehr et al., 2003), identified many similarities among the interventions, including their focus on changing the student, beginning with a *personal-affective focus* (e.g., individual counseling, participation in an interpersonal-relations class) and then shifting to an *academic focus* (e.g., specialized courses or tutoring), and their efforts to address alterable variables (e.g., poor grades, attendance, and attitude toward school). Most interventions were implemented with secondary students with a history of poor academic performance and dropping out, poor attendance, and teacher referral for supplemental support; students with disabilities were targeted in only two programs and specifically excluded from two. Interventions that yielded moderate to large effects on at least one dependent variable provided early reading programs, tutoring, counseling, and mentoring; they emphasized creating caring environments and relationships, used block scheduling, and offered community-service opportunities.

There is consensus that successful interventions do more than increase student attendance—they help students and families who feel marginalized in their relations with teachers and peers to be connected at school and with learning. Student engagement across the school years depends on the degree to which there is a match between the student's characteristics and the school environment so that the student is able to handle the academic and behavioral demands of school. For more than a decade, we and our colleagues have field-tested the Check & Connect model of student engagement among students with and without disabilities. Our field tests have been conducted in kindergarten through grade 12 and in both urban and suburban schools (Sinclair et al., in press). Applications of this evidence-based intervention approach have underscored the critical need to keep education and learning the salient issue for many students and their families. We have used the concept of “persistence-plus” to show students that there is someone who is not going to give up on them or allow them to be distracted from school; that there is someone who knows them and is available to them throughout the school year, the summer, and into the next school year; and that caring adults want them to learn, do the work, attend class regularly, be on time, express frustration constructively, stay in school, and succeed. Furthermore, McPartland (1994) cogently addressed the need for school-completion programs to be adapted to fit local circumstances when he argued, “It is unlikely that a program developed elsewhere can be duplicated exactly in another site, because local talents and priorities for school reform, the particular interests and needs of the students to be served, and the conditions of the school to be changed will differ” (p. 256).

Consensus is emerging with respect to essential intervention components. In particular, the “personalization” of education—striving to understand the nature of academic, social, and personal problems affecting students and tailoring services to address individualized concerns—is an essential component. Effective programs aimed at

promoting school completion focus on building students' relationships with teachers, parents, and peers and include systematic monitoring of the students' performance; they work to develop students' problem-solving skills, provide opportunities for success in schoolwork, create a caring and supportive environment, communicate the relevance of education to future endeavors, and help with students' personal problems (McPartland, 1994; Sinclair et al., in press). In a comprehensive review of federal dropout-prevention evaluations, Dynarski and Gleason (2002) identified smaller class sizes, more personalized settings, and individualized learning plans as characteristics that lowered dropout rates in both General Educational Development (GED) programs for older students and alternative middle school programs. Of particular importance is the need for a more intensive intervention approach. Although low-intensity supplemental services such as tutoring or occasional counseling were relatively easy to implement, they had little to no impact on student outcomes, such as grades, test scores, attendance, or the dropout rate.

CHALLENGES

New federal initiatives have made it clear that decisions about educational programs should be based on empirical evidence. Research is only beginning to address the critical need for programs that promote student engagement and school completion, and thereby reduce dropout rates. Educators and policymakers are in need of sound research to guide best practice.

As programs are developed and evaluated, we must address the challenge of *student mobility*, which is significantly associated with school failure (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). High rates of mobility seriously undermine the potential for youth to value school or develop a sense of belonging. Even if a school offers services well suited to meet the needs of disenfranchised students, the potential benefit can be lost if youth do not remain in the school long enough or trust someone enough to participate. If we are to reduce significantly the dropout rate and promote the successful completion of school, we must grapple with the question of how to ensure that the protective factors of sustained intervention and continuity of relationships with teachers and peers exist when students move frequently. There may be a need for interventions that coordinate the efforts of multiple schools and multiple school districts and perhaps a mechanism for educators and mentors to track student performance and partner with families within and across states.

Another challenge that must be addressed is the acceptability of the current array of exit documents, ranging from honors diplomas to certificates of completion, attendance diplomas, and special education diplomas. The options recognize different ways in which students complete school, and which option students are encouraged to pursue has often been based on educators' expectations for their success. Yet current federal law (NCLB) indicates that for purposes of school accountability, only those students who have earned a standard diploma in 4 years will be counted in the percentage of students graduating. We must examine the consequences of this definition. Is the value of earning a diploma within 5 years or completing school via other options discounted? It will be important for the nation to consider its definition of successful school completion to ensure that the requirement for a standard diploma does not provide an incentive for students to drop out.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The dropout problem in the United States is solvable, provided student performance is systematically monitored to ensure students are provided with realistic opportunities for academic and reading success, supported as learners by educators and families, encouraged to see the relevance of school and learning in their personal lives and future goals, and helped with personal problems across the school years. Increasing students' engagement and enthusiasm for school requires much more than simply having them stay in school—it involves supporting students to help them meet the defined academic standards of their schools, as well as the underlying social and behavioral standards. If students are engaged at school and with learning, they should not only graduate but also demonstrate academic and social competence at school completion.

NCLB demands and provides unique opportunities for educators and parents to partner in order to foster the learning of all students across school years and settings. To improve outcomes for youth at high risk for school failure, further research and evaluation must systematically document strategies that actively engage youth in the learning process and help youth to stay in school and on track to graduate while developing academic and behavioral skills. The educational success of all students will require explicit attention to social and emotional learning as well as academics, through a focus on cognitive, psychological, and behavioral engagement, along with academic engagement.

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