

I N F O R M A T I O N B R I E F

AN INFORMATION BRIEF OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR SUPERVISION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT



Closing the Gap: Keeping Students in School

Third in a Series

The nation's dropout problem has been making national headlines with more and more frequency and more and more urgency. Although certainly not a new problem, the failure to earn a high school diploma is receiving heightened attention because the causes and effects of dropping out have changed significantly. No longer is a dropout simply a young person who could not make the grade, who left school because of pregnancy, or who quit school because of drug addiction. According to a recent study, data suggest that most dropouts are "students who could have, and believe they could have, succeeded in school" (Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morison, 2006, iii). Of even more concern is the fact that positive life outcomes for dropouts have changed significantly with the advancement of the information age. In short, it is becoming less and less likely that hard work alone is sufficient to bring a dropout into the middle class. Lacking basic computing skills, dropouts qualify only for low-end jobs, often without benefits, that forever trap them in the category of "working poor."

This issue of *Infobrief* is the third in a series designed to examine factors

contributing to the achievement gap and to identify best practices and policy implications to help close that gap. The first issue provided an overview and definition of the achievement gap, the second explored the achievement gap in early childhood education, and this issue focuses on the dropout rate and a powerful tool to combat it: student engagement.

How Many Kids?

Although dropout data vary according to the source and the method of accounting, statistics such as a one in three dropout rate overall, and one in two for Latinos and African Americans, are becoming more universally accepted (Thornburgh, 2006). Nationwide, more than half of students with disabilities fail to earn a high school diploma (Orfield, 2004). Researchers also agree that despite two decades of educational reform, including institutional change targeted toward student success, a steady dropout rate of approximately 30 percent remains (Barton, 2005). These estimates translate into alarming numbers nationwide: in 2003, 3.5 million young people ages 16–25 did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school (Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morison, 2006).

Current controversy focuses on the gap between official government estimates of the dropout rates and those put forth by several independent

organizations. Many researchers contend that the U.S. federal government's official source for dropout estimates is flawed, relying on two items in the U.S. Census Bureau's current population survey to place graduation rates at nearly 90 percent (Barton, 2005). This rate excludes transients and prisoners—populations that include large numbers of dropouts—but includes students who earn a GED but have not completed four years of high school. Other methods used to count graduates vary widely, and rates reported by school districts and states alike suffer from a number of validity problems, ranging from sloppy record keeping to a tendency to become “creative in reporting why students [are] no longer enrolled” (Barton, 2005, p. 7). Variation in reporting methods includes counting those who withdraw from school but indicate they plan to take the GED as graduates or eliminating students who leave due to pregnancy, military service, or incarceration from the official reports of dropout rates (Thornburgh, 2006). “The drive to improve student achievement in American schools has created a perverse incentive for schools to push out struggling students, ideally without having to count them as dropouts” (Landsberg, 2006, p. 7). Other critics (Barton, 2005; Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morison, 2006) suggest that pressure from the 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets further aggravates the problem.

A recent series in the *Los Angeles Times* profiled Birmingham High School's class of 2005—1,100 strong when they entered as 9th graders but sending only 521 across the stage four years later (Landsberg, 2006). Reporters from the *Times* tracked the missing students, finding that many were finishing their education elsewhere, either in a traditional school, vocational school, or alternative school. Some were working, others were taking care of family members, but many expressed hope of one day earning the diploma that life circumstances led them to abandon. Others, following a series of transfers, had simply disappeared. In the end, a school with the initial capability to hand out 1,100 diplomas awarded less than half that number.

Why Does It Matter?

Prior to the onset of the information age, high school dropouts still had a chance to find jobs in skilled labor

and work their way into the middle class. By the mid-1970s, however, economists began to note a shift; high school dropouts and those with only a high school diploma began falling out of the middle class as their jobs moved into the computer sector or went overseas (Landsberg, 2006). Between 1971 and 2002, earnings for male workers without a diploma dropped 34.7 percent, and earnings for male workers with only a high school diploma dropped by 27.9 percent (Barton, 2005). Female earnings for both groups showed a less dramatic change, although female workers who dropped out did show a

San Diego's Herbert Hoover High School, at one time the lowest-performing high school in the city, has been making news by making waves—or, more accurately, by turning the tide on a number of factors that contributed to the failure of the school to serve its students on many fronts. By the late 1990s, Hoover outwardly evinced many attributes of systemic school failure: high poverty rates, high rates of pregnancy, and low rates of graduation. The school hadn't met state accountability standards for 15 years. The kids called it the “ghetto school.” “It wasn't really a fair label, and we didn't want it,” says Doug Fisher, an English teacher and director of professional development at Hoover. “Outwardly, yes, things looked bad, but inside, *very good things* were happening at our school.” Not only did Hoover offer a solid education, but also a wide range of health and social services were available to students and their families through an on-site health center. Additionally, Hoover was blessed with administrators, teachers, and staff who were willing to work together to solve problems and make changes.

The 1998–99 school year marked the beginning of a turnaround plan that immediately began having an effect, and by 2001, the school finally hit state targets. But Hoover didn't stop there. In the years following, it exceeded state growth targets on the API (Academic Performing Index). In 2005, attendance rates improved to 94.5 percent, a phenomenal rate for an urban school providing free and reduced lunch to 99 percent of its students. In addition, graduation rates shot up, and by 2006, one-fourth of the graduating class was headed to four-year universities, including Berkeley.

decline in earnings compared to their counterparts with a diploma or GED (Barton, 2005). As these statistics indicate, a high school diploma or GED alone is no longer sufficient to bridge the gap; indeed, the disparity between high school and college graduates has become nearly as striking as the disparity between those with a high school diploma and those without. High school graduates are four times more likely to be unemployed than college graduates, and even when high school graduates are working, college graduates earn 80 percent more (Olson, 2006).

A high school diploma is important to employers as well. Although a GED may be an acceptable substitute for a diploma in some fields, in others the difference in the social, as well as academic, learning process required to receive the diploma can make or break the student as an employee. High school graduates, notes the president of a Midwestern industrial plant, have “learned how to get along with people, some of whom they may not have liked so well, in order to achieve their goals” (Thornburgh, 2006, p. 40). A GED does not demonstrate that they have those skills, which are necessary for success in

THE CHANCE TO SUCCEED

The “turnaround plan” began with a question: How do we get the 14- to 18-year-olds motivated to make it to class by 7:30? Teachers and staff took a hard look at the issues and the data, right down to the level of investigating trends in first period attendance and making changes at the point where their students tumbled in the doors. They tapped their own experience, creativity, and caring and came up with a plan that employed a number of strategies. First and foremost, they targeted literacy—focusing on developing core competencies in reading across subject areas and using literacy to increase student engagement. Says Fisher, “Our kids had competence issues in terms of reading, and how can you blame them? If you spend the entire school day struggling to read things that are too hard, you’re going to give up.” So the literacy plan, designed to provide students a system to boost reading competency across all of their courses, came first. Next came mentorship, in the form of the Challenge 10, a program that allows teachers to choose any 10 students and focus on mentoring and guiding them. This program alone allows teachers and staff to provide additional guidance to 1,400 students.

Other elements of the plan involved reaching out into the local community. Of course, the school’s health center continues to be a big draw, providing doctors, a full dental clinic, and a referral system to hospitals and specialists and serving as the primary health care provider for 1,200 families. The resulting message is simple: If you need health care, come to school. Other community programs reiterate this “come to school” theme. For

example, Hoover administrators partnered with the local police department to reduce truancy. On random days, the vice principals and police officers work in pairs, showing up at kids’ houses or neighborhood hangouts, picking up the kids and forcing the parents to come and get them. The message to the kids is, “Hey, Hoover missed you so we came and got you.” Finally, the school made a strategic funding decision and hired a full-time social worker to serve as a parent-center coordinator, tasked with engaging families with school life at Hoover. This staffer conducts parent information workshops on topics such as the tests that kids need to take, organizes adult ESL classes, and helps bring parents into roles at the school.

In the end, the Hoover plan uses every possible angle to draw kids in, repeating again and again the message: If you need something, come to school. Food, health care, social services, or simply someone who knows who you are and cares if you are missing—Hoover offers all of this and more to its students. Once students are in the door, teachers and administrators add another layer to the message: You *can* make it . . . and here’s how. Fisher explains, “Almost anyone would quit if they couldn’t read. You choose things that make you feel good. Adults do it—they choose their jobs and their friends, so why wouldn’t kids want to do the same?” By focusing on giving their students the gift of literacy, Hoover offers them a real shot at a high school diploma and the resultant competency to succeed in life.

almost any work environment. Further, with the infusion of technology into the most mundane of manufacturing jobs, even the lowest-paid, entry-level worker must arrive on the job with some computing skills—skills one may not necessarily acquire in the pursuit of a GED.

In addition to calculating the professional outcomes, researchers have calculated the overall effects of dropping out. They estimate that dropouts are far more likely to become incarcerated, suffer poor health, and have shorter life spans than high school graduates (Martin & Halperin, 2006). “Dropping out of high school today is to your societal health what smoking is to your physical health, an indicator of a host of poor outcomes to follow, from low lifetime earnings to high incarceration rates to a high likelihood that your children will drop out of high school and start the cycle anew” (Thornburgh, 2006, p. 32).

Failing to get a high school diploma hurts not only the individual but the country as well. Dropouts cost billions in lost income taxes, increased medical costs, and use of public assistance (Martin & Halperin, 2006). Additionally, dropouts commit more crimes than graduates; one economist estimated that if graduation rates were just one percent higher, crimes would drop by 100,000 per year, with an associated cost savings to society of \$1.4 billion per year (Moretti, 2005).

When Does It Start?

The factors that lead to dropping out are well documented in the literature, and most, if not all, are rooted in the earlier grades, well before a student reaches high school. Falling behind grade level in reading, failing a grade, unaddressed truancy, and what Bridgeland and colleagues (2006) refer to as a “gradual disengagement” from school all set the stage for failure well before students enter the 9th grade. Some stay in school until they “age out,” flailing away in a cycle of failure that maintains their enrollment but leaves them too deficient in credits to have any hope of graduating. In elementary and middle school, notes Landsberg, “year after year, students were allowed to fail upward, promoted despite a trail of *Ds* and *Fs*” (2006, p. 2). This trend abruptly halts in high school, where credits are awarded only for passing grades.

Middle school can challenge even those students who were doing well prior to entry. The multiple challenges of managing early adolescence often prove to be overwhelming at this level. Discipline problems increase, and students cite depression, disengagement, safety concerns, a desire to drop out, and a degree of boredom with schoolwork that “exceeds rates of every industrialized nation except Israel” (Yecke, 2005, p. 16). Achievement data presented by a number of sources sound an additional alarm. International studies such as the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) pinpoint the middle school years as the time when the achievement rates of U.S. students begin to plummet compared to other industrialized nations (Yecke, 2005). Trend data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggest that middle schools are not able to sustain the achievement levels of elementary schools and set up a decline in achievement that becomes too obvious to ignore by high school (Yecke, 2005). Further, in math literacy and problem solving, the 2003 Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) ranked 15-year-olds in the United States 24th out of 29 countries.

Although the statistics paint a bleak picture, numbers alone don’t always tell the whole story, and they can lag behind positive change for a number of years. Notes one urban-school teacher, reporting from a school that until recently had failed to meet state standards for 15 consecutive years: “Outwardly, yes, things looked bad, but inside, *very good things* were happening in our school.” (*See box, pp. 2–3.*) The key, at this school and at so many others, lies in establishing the mindset that, indeed, a high school diploma is possible for all students. Keeping students in school, engaged in their learning, and focused on a path to a successful life is possible, a truth validated by independent research as well as the experiences of teachers, students, and dropouts themselves.

A Different Voice

A recent report offers a number of insights from former students as to why they dropped out (Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morison, 2006). Note the authors: “Our student survey and national studies show that dropping out is a slow process of disengagement and that problems predictive of dropping out often emerge early in a student’s life” (p. 15). The “slow disengagement” often

begins with missed homework assignments, low or failing grades, and repeating a grade. It escalates to two-hour lunches, skipping one class, then other classes, and then whole days or weeks of school. Once the pattern of absences is established, many drop out because they feel they cannot catch up. Some students formally end their schooling by following state protocols for withdrawal. Others, however, do attempt to continue their education by transferring to other traditional or nontraditional school settings, but eventually they, too, fall through the cracks of the educational system.

Some dropouts, however, cited reasons for not continuing their formal education that do not fit the established or expected profile. Predictably, some cited personal reasons for dropping out, such as pregnancy, needing to get a job to make money, or the responsibility of taking care of a family member. Others, however, reported that uninteresting classes and insufficient academic demands led to boredom and, eventually, disengagement. Still others noted that they had too much freedom, saying, for example, that it was too easy to skip class and leave the school building or grounds unnoticed. One respondent in the Bridgeland and colleagues study commented that freedom, combined with the relative ennui of the classroom setting, led to his downfall. The streets, he asserted, were more interesting than sitting in a classroom all day. “We got to leave for lunch . . . then, once we got out there and smelled that fresh air . . .” there was no incentive to go back (2006, p. 9).

Dropouts interviewed for this study cited a number of factors that, in looking back, they believe could have kept them engaged and in school:

- Enhancing the connection between school and work.
- Providing real-world learning experiences, such as internships and service learning.
- Making school more relevant and engaging.
- Providing more help for struggling students.
- Offering more after-school tutoring, Saturday sessions, and summer sessions.

Many of the dropouts suggested that more structure, supervision, a safer environment, and parental involvement could have kept them in school (Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morison, 2006). Others cited “better teach-

ers,” “smaller classes,” and more “one-on-one teaching.” Bridgeland and colleagues note, “These young people craved one-on-one attention from their teachers, and when they received it, they remembered it making a difference. . . . Some of their best days were when their teachers noticed them” (p. 13).

The Road to Success

Many avenues are available that can combine the resources and talents of educators, families, and communities to keep students engaged in the educational system. In traditional settings, a focus on promoting school “connectedness” can help students stay engaged from 9th grade to graduation. School connectedness promotes a feeling among students that they “like school, feel like they belong, believe teachers care about them and their learning, believe that education matters, have friends at school, believe that discipline is fair, and have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities” (Blum, 2005, p. 16). Teacher support is critical to connectedness and engagement. Support can come in many forms, ranging from making teaching relevant to students’ lives to creating a classroom structure and set of expectations that promote high performance to providing support for student autonomy and independent decision making as well as productive teamwork (Blum, 2005). In addition, because teacher support results in greater student engagement it, in turn, leads to higher levels of attendance and test scores, ultimate predictors of high school completion (Klem & Connell, 2004).

In addition to teacher support and a focus on engagement, studies have shown that combining academic rigor with career or technical learning, work-based learning, and specific guidance or mentoring designed to help the student move toward postsecondary goals not only improves graduation rates but also helps boost scores in reading, math, and science—outcomes that will help all graduates, whether they go on to college or report directly to work (Bottoms, 2003; Aratoni, 2006).

For students who cannot succeed in a traditional school setting, a variety of nontraditional settings—alternative schools, vocational schools, continuation schools, independent study, and national programs such as Job Corps—offer a change of environment, a new direction,

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

When the letter landed in Thomas A. Edison Elementary School principal Eileen Santiago's hands, it was yet another validation of the school's—and the community's—approach to educating the whole child. “This was once the school nobody wanted to come to,” says Santiago, “and now, yet another letter of recognition.” The May 2006 letter brought news of the latest award: Edison had been selected as one of 795 high-performing, gap-closing schools nationwide. Other honors include the National School of Character award and the Sharing Success award for a turnaround school. Edison's turnaround has been 10 years in the making, the result of commitment by school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and the community.

Although located in Port Chester, N.Y., 30 miles outside of New York City, Edison has the look and feel of an urban school. Ninety-four percent of its students are minorities: 84 percent are Hispanic and another 10 percent are African American. It is a Title I school, and 80 percent of its students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Students face the multiple challenges of language barriers, acculturation, and poverty. Nonetheless, Edison is a positive place to be—for students, their families, and members of the community. Everything about the tone of Edison's environment speaks to the success of the long-term focus on character education and the development of the whole child. “Yes, test scores are important,” explains Santiago, “but here we focus on the whole child as a means to increase student achievement.”

In its role as a community school, Edison offers on-site health and dental care, after-school and summer

programs, parent education, and college courses through a professional development program with a local teacher education college. Students complete service projects each year, and the 5th graders create an exhibit, open to the public, reflecting the values of what they have learned set against the context of a historical event (e.g., the Holocaust). Students recite the Pledge of Allegiance daily, along with the school's pledge to their core values. Displays around the school depict students caught in the act of doing good things.

“We work hard to build a sense of community in our classrooms,” explains Santiago. “We focus on fostering positive interactions between adults and children, as well as child to child.” Studies have indicated considerable benefits to establishing warm, trusting relationships between children and caregivers, including increased cognitive development and decreased involvement with the juvenile justice system later on. In addition to focusing on relationships, partnerships, and teamwork, Edison uses every opportunity to help children practice language and problem-solving skills in real-life settings, such as classroom meetings to discuss and establish rules. The end result is that Edison's students do well academically, with achievement in math and English language arts above state averages and increasing every year, and continue to do well once they leave. The school consistently receives positive feedback from the middle school the students attend after Edison. Instilled with a sense of social and ethical responsibility from an early age, Edison's students continue to carry themselves with a sense of responsibility and integrity into middle school, “even when they're naughty,” Santiago laughs.

and more personal attention. Although success is difficult to track because students are transient and may leave and return many times prior to completion of a degree (Landsberg, 2006), students interviewed for both the *Los Angeles Times* study and the Bridgeland report noted that when they left their school, they did not intend to leave their education behind. Many, in fact,

found their way to earning a diploma through these other avenues.

Policy Recommendations

The literature abounds with recommendations for increasing student engagement in light of its corresponding

relationship to high school completion. Although derived from empirical research, as well as from the experiences of students and teachers, the recommendations are neither designed nor intended to be all-inclusive. Global recommendations deal generally with amassing and analyzing data on the situation in order to better understand it, as well as suggesting action steps for improving student engagement. Other recommendations, grouped by the earliest age at which they may be practically implemented, reflect the understanding that the path to disengagement and eventual dropping out begins well before high school.

Global Recommendations

- Take immediate action to ensure accurate reporting of graduation rates.
- Disaggregate graduation rates for all major student subgroups.
- Replace incentives to push students out of school with rewards for keeping them in school.
- Set high academic standards for all students with an emphasis on greater relevance, rigor, and retention.
- Provide all students with the same core curriculum.
- Ensure teachers and students have a voice in the education system and have access to research-based professional development—especially in terms of being able to identify and work with those students at risk.
- Share research linking physical and emotional health and academic success throughout the school years.
- Engage parents and the community, especially business, in supporting a whole-child approach to learning. For example, initiate effective collaborations with local and national businesses to help students at risk see the natural progression of school- and experience-based learning with success in the global workplace.

Elementary School

- Provide opportunities for students who are falling behind to catch up.
- Ensure the availability of a cadre of well-trained tutors.
- Extend the class periods, school day, or school year.
- Provide parents with effective techniques for supporting homework completion, enforcing academic standards, and encouraging healthy behavior.

Middle School

- Ensure that teacher preservice preparation focuses on understanding adolescent learning, the relationship between health and learning, and strategies to encourage engagement.
- Help school districts develop a middle school curriculum that adequately prepares students for the challenges of high school and beyond.
- Investigate the feasibility of moving to a K–8 model as a method for changing the social dynamics of this age group.
- Provide an added emphasis on structure and discipline for this age group to create a sound learning environment.

High School

- Recognize the demonstrated value of career technical education, as well as classic college prep pathways, in improving achievement and school completion rates.
- Ensure that every student has an advisor.
- Revise policies to allow schools to connect with social and health services and to facilitate student access to essential supportive services.
- Redesign high school courses and instructional methods in ways that will increase adolescent learning (e.g., establish professional learning communities for the teachers to utilize the most effective teaching practices).
- Offer remedial learning and other opportunities for students who are behind to catch up or cover more ground.

In the end, the best response to the troubling headlines and statistics about dropout rates can be found in a slow and focused march forward, empowering students with a sense of engagement and responsibility for their future, providing a clear path forward, and offering support along the way.

Subsequent issues of *Infobrief* will look closely at best practices for closing the achievement gap by addressing strategies for bridging the income gap and increasing community and family engagement in schools and learning. The series will continue to examine the research available to support decision makers in developing policy

to strengthen the crucial interplay between teachers, families, communities, and schools in fostering success in learning for all students.

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