

Dropouts

A student's decision to drop out of school has long-term consequences that can contribute to juvenile delinquency, welfare dependency, or, in the worst cases, prison.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the population segment of U.S. 16- through 24-year-olds who were not enrolled in school, or who did not have a high school diploma or a General Educational Development credential was about 11 percent in 2001. The economic value attached to completion of ever-greater levels of education has been well documented (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

In 2000, adults ages 25 to 34 who had dropped out of school or had not acquired a GED, earned up to 30 percent less than their peers who had completed high school or had GEDs. The gap widened when comparing the incomes of high school dropouts with those people with bachelor's degrees. In 2000, male and female college graduates earned \$42,292 and \$32,238 respectively, while male and female high school dropouts earned \$19,225 and \$11,583 respectively. (Wirt, 2002). But the value of a high school education cannot be measured in dollars alone. Rates of high-risk behaviors such as teen pregnancy, delinquency, substance abuse, and crime are significantly higher among dropouts (Woods, 1995).

The different methods of calculating and reporting dropout rates sometimes generate controversy. For example, a state may report one set of numbers suggesting a low dropout rate; then, a private organization might analyze the statistics using a different measure and accuse the state or school system of underestimating the problem. Here are different ways of calculating dropout rates:

Event Rate: This method measures the percentage of young adults ages 15 through 24 who dropped out during the school year preceding the data collection. This annual measure provides important information about how effective educators are in keeping students enrolled in school. The event rate is generally lower than the status rate (see below).

Status Rate: This method measures the percentage of young adults ages 16 through 24 who are not enrolled in school and who have not completed a high school diploma or obtained a General Educational Development credential or GED. Status rates reveal the extent of the dropout problem in the population, and are therefore used to estimate the need for further education and training designed to help dropouts participate fully in the economy and broader life of the nation.

Cohort Rate: This approach measures what happens to a group of students over a period of time. The rate is based on repeated measures of a cohort of students with shared experiences and reveals how many students starting in a specific grade drop out over time.

High School Completion Rate: This rate represents the proportion of 18- through 24-year-olds who have left high school and earned a high school diploma or the equivalent, such as a GED credential.

Although the dropout rate overall has changed little over the past decade, there are great variances among racial and ethnic groups and geographical regions. American-born Hispanics, for example, have the largest dropout rate of any ethnic or racial group, hence, dropout rates in the South and the West tend to be higher than those in the Midwest and Northeast (NCES, 2000). Those findings are reflected in 2001 graduation rates as well. Hispanics had the lowest graduation rate, 52 percent. The graduation rate was 51 percent for African-Americans and 72 percent for whites (Greene & Forster, 2003).

The strongest predictors that a student is likely to drop out are family characteristics such as: socioeconomic status, family structure, family stress (e.g., death, divorce, family moves), and the mother's age. Students who come from low-income families, are the children of single, young, unemployed mothers, or who have experienced high degrees of family stress are more likely than other students to drop out of school. Of those characteristics, low socioeconomic status has been shown to bear the strongest relationship to students' tendency to drop out. In one study, for example, students of lower socioeconomic status had a dropout rate four times higher than that of students of a higher socioeconomic status (Alexander, Entwisle and Kabbani, 2001).

The tendency for students to drop out is also associated with their school experiences. According to the U.S. Department of Education, students drop out of school for the following reasons:

- Dislike of school;
- Low academic achievement;
- Retention at grade level;
- A sense that teachers and administrators do not care about students; and
- Inability to feel comfortable in a large, depersonalized school setting (1999).

Research indicates that the lower the achievement level, the greater the likelihood that a student will drop out of school. For example, a study of students in Baltimore schools found that low test scores and report card grades as early as the 1st grade were a reliable predictor of whether or not the students would later drop out (Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani, 2000). Grade retention—being "held back" or flunked—has also been found to be highly correlated with dropping out. For example, students who repeat a grade, even as early as kindergarten, significantly increase their chances of dropping out (Kaufman & Bradby, 1992).

According to a 2002 report by the U.S. General Accounting Office, Congress' investigative arm, schools generally approach the dropout problem in three different ways. Schools tend to: provide supplemental services for needy students, offer different learning environments as an alternative to the regular classroom, or institute schoolwide restructuring efforts.

Those supplemental services include tutoring, social services, and counseling. Tutoring programs such as the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program place older students in tutoring positions with elementary school children. The aim of the program is to increase the self-esteem of youths deemed at risk by placing them in positions of responsibility. A review of the program found that 12 percent of the students in a comparison group dropped out of school, while just 1 percent of the program participants dropped out (Cardenas et al., 1992).

Alternative learning environments come in several forms, each designed to provide struggling students a different path they can take instead of dropping out. Districts may offer alternative classrooms within a traditional school, offering varied programs in a different environment; a school-within-a-school, with specialized education programs; or a magnet school, offering a focused curriculum in one or more subject areas (National Dropout Prevention Center).

Partnership at Las Vegas (PAL) is an example of an alternative learning environment. The PAL program embodies the school-within-a-school concept that focuses on academic and career skills. At-risk 11th and 12th graders attend class four days a week and work at nonpaid internships one day a week. In addition to covering the basics, the curriculum focuses the connection between school and work. PAL participants are far less likely than nonparticipants to drop out of school. Two percent of the students who have gone through the PAL program dropped out, while 13.5 percent of the students in a comparison group became dropouts (GAO, 2002).

Some districts have restructured entire schools to combat the dropout phenomenon. Schoolwide restructuring usually occurs in schools with a majority of students at risk of dropping out. Under the Talent Development Model, one template for this approach, officials may reorganize the school into smaller learning academies, create standards-based instructional programs, and put more emphasis on professional development. A three-year evaluation of five Talent Development high schools in Philadelphia found that in addition to achievement gains, schools that had implemented the model for two or more years saw their 9th grade attendance rates rise by 15 percent (Philadelphia Education Fund, 2002).

"Career academies," another dropout-prevention strategy, offer career-focused curricula, team teaching, and involvement from the business community. An ongoing, 10-year evaluation of career academies found that, among other results, they significantly cut dropout rates of students at high risk of school failure (Kemple & Snipes, 2000).

Additionally, at the federal level, the School Dropout Prevention Program was authorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Its purpose is to provide three-year grants to states and school districts to assist in dropout prevention and school re-entry activities. Grantees must demonstrate the effectiveness of their proposed prevention and re-entry activities, based on scientific research.



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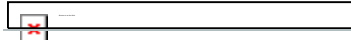
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Dropouts in America is a collection of papers presented at a conference sponsored by the **Civil Rights Project** and **Achieve Inc.** in 2001.

According to the study, "**Hispanic Youth Dropping Out of U.S. Schools, Measuring the Challenge**," June 2003, from the **Pew Hispanic Center**, the Hispanic dropout rate is high in comparison to other ethnic groups because dropout rates have been inflated over the years. The report states that the retention of Hispanics in U.S. schools is actually a "manageable challenge."

The **National Dropout Prevention Center/Network** serves as a clearinghouse on dropout-related issues, providing research and resources to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. The center posts **strategies** for dropout-reduction. See also the **Journal of At-Risk Issues**.

The U.S. Department of Education's, **School Dropout Prevention Program**, provides grants for programs aimed to prevent students from dropping out and also helps dropouts return to school. Includes examples of **funded programs**.

The **Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program** is a tutoring program that aims to increase the self-esteem of at-risk youths by giving them the opportunity to tutor young school children.

The **Talent Development Model** is a school restructuring model aimed at reducing and preventing the occurrence of dropping out of high school. Read a **three-year study** of Talent Development High Schools in Philadelphia. (Requires **Adobe's Acrobat Reader**.)

The Houston-based **Project GRAD** (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) believes that dropout prevention begins in preschool. View a February 2003 **white paper** on its approach. (Requires **Adobe's Acrobat Reader**.)