DROPPING OUT

WHY STUDENTS DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL
AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT

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INTRODUCTION

Cesar entered Hacienda Middle School in the Los Angeles School District in the sixth grade. He lived with his mother and three younger siblings in a garage that was divided into sleeping quarters and a makeshift kitchen with no running water. His mother, who spoke only Spanish, supported the family by working long hours at a minimum-wage job.

During the first semester of seventh grade, Cesar failed every class, in part due to poor attendance and not completing assignments. But by the end of seventh grade, with the assistance of a dropout prevention project at the school, Cesar was able to pass two of his six classes.

With the support of the dropout prevention project, his grades continued to improve. Yet, as he entered eighth grade, Cesar was spending more time after school away from home and on the streets. He began to wear gang-related attire and hairstyles, although he denied gang involvement.

Teachers began to respond to him more positively as his grades improved, but because he did not change his “appearance,” school administrators did not seem to change their earlier negative perceptions about him.

Two weeks into his last semester of eighth grade, Cesar got into a fight and kicked a younger student. Because of this incident, Cesar was given what the school district called an “opportunity transfer.” However, no apparent effort was made by the school to see that Cesar actually enrolled in the new school, nor that he attended.

Cesar stopped attending school in eighth grade. He became a school dropout.

Public high schools in the United States reported that 607,789 students dropped out in 2008–09. An even higher number fails to graduate. Education Week, the nation’s leading education periodical, estimates that 1.3 million students from the high school class of 2010 failed to graduate. This means that the nation’s schools are losing more than 7,000 students
each school day. And these figures do not count students like Cesar who drop out before reaching ninth grade. Altogether, the U.S. Census estimates that in October 2010 there were almost 28 million dropouts age eighteen and over in the United States.4

While these figures are sizeable, the magnitude of the problem is better understood when expressed as a rate that reflects the proportion of students who drop out of high school. The 607,789 students who dropped out of high school in 2008–09 represent more than 4 percent of all students enrolled in grades 9–12.5 The 1.3 million students from the high school class of 2010 who failed to graduate represent 30 percent of the 4.3 million students enrolled in the ninth grade in 2006.6

Yet dropout rates tell only part of the story. It is also important to consider graduation rates, which reflect the proportion of students who actually graduate from high school. The two rates are not directly related. Students who drop out can still graduate at a later time, while students who never quit school still may not graduate. To graduate, students must earn a high school diploma, but some students earn alternative diplomas by taking state or national examinations. Students who earn these alternative diplomas are not considered graduates, but they also are not considered dropouts.

Dropout and graduation rates vary widely among various populations of students. For example, Education Week estimates that in the nation as a whole, 69 percent of all students who entered high school in the fall of 2003 graduated in 2007. But only 56 percent of Hispanics and 54 percent of blacks from that class graduated in 2007, compared to 81 percent of Asians and 77 percent of whites.7 Among the almost 400,000 students with disabilities who left school in 2006–07, only 56 percent graduated with a diploma.8 Dropout rates in the two-year period from 2002 to 2004 were twice as high for tenth-grade students whose native language was not English, compared to native English speakers.9

Similar disparities exist among districts and schools. Education Week estimates that the high school graduation rate for the class of 2007 among the nation’s fifty largest school districts ranged from 40 percent in Clark County, Nevada, to 83 percent in Montgomery County, Maryland.10 One study of Chicago’s eighty-six public high schools found that the graduation rates over a four-year period for students who entered the ninth grade in 2000 varied from a low of 27 percent to a high of 90 percent!11

Not only is the graduation rate in the United States generally low and highly variable, but it also appears to be getting worse. Nobel economist
James Heckman examined the various sources of data used to calculate dropout and graduation rates and, after correcting for errors in previous calculations, concluded that:

- The high school graduation rate is lower than the federal government reports.
- It is lower today than it was forty years ago.
- Disparities in graduation rates among racial and ethnic minorities have not improved over the past thirty-five years.\(^\text{12}\)

Reducing the number of dropouts has become a national policy concern both inside and outside of the government:

- In February 2005, the nation’s governors held a two-day summit on high schools where Microsoft CEO Bill Gates called American high schools “obsolete,” noting that only 68 out of every 100 ninth graders graduate, and six philanthropies pledged $42 million to raise high school graduation rates.\(^\text{13}\)
- The April 9, 2006, cover of *Time* magazine was titled “Dropout Nation” and featured a number of stories about the dropout crisis in America.
- Oprah Winfrey dedicated her television show on April 11, 2006, to the nation’s dropout crisis.\(^\text{14}\)
- On March 1, 2010 America’s Promise Alliance brought together government, business, and community leaders to launch the “Grad Nation campaign” with a goal of a 90 percent national graduation rate by 2020.\(^\text{15}\) At this event, President Barack Obama stated, “This is a problem we cannot afford to accept and we cannot afford to ignore. The stakes are too high—for our children, for our economy, and for our country. It’s time for all of us to come together—parents, students, principals and teachers, business leaders and elected officials from across the political spectrum—to end America’s dropout crisis.”\(^\text{16}\)

Such concern is not new. In 1990, twenty years before the launch of the Grad Nation campaign, the nation’s governors and President George H. W. Bush adopted six National Education Goals for the year 2000.\(^\text{17}\) One of these goals was to increase the high school graduation rate to 90 percent and to eliminate the gap in high school graduation rates between minority and nonminority students. Sadly, as the figures above demonstrate, the nation fell well short of that goal.
Going back even further, in 1963 President John F. Kennedy initiated a national “Summer Dropout Campaign” to increase publicity about the problem and to assist local school districts in identifying potential dropouts and helping to return these students to school in the fall. Kennedy’s efforts were part of a growing nationwide concern over the plight of adolescents who failed to finish high school—a concern that historian Sherman Dorn argues was the beginning of the identification of dropping out as an important social problem worthy of widespread public attention.

The national concern for dropouts is reflected in numerous studies and programs focusing on this issue at the national, state, and local levels. Since 1988, the federal government alone has spent more than $300 million on dropout prevention programs. Many states have enacted their own programs to assist local schools and districts in addressing this issue. And research on school dropouts has increased dramatically over the past decade.

But why is there so much concern?

There are a number of reasons. One is economic. Dropping out of school is costly both for dropouts themselves and for society as a whole. First, dropouts have difficulty finding jobs. Government data show that only 31 percent of students who dropped out of school in the 2009–10 school year were employed the following October. America’s recent economic recession has been particularly hard on dropouts: in December 2010 only 44 percent of high school dropouts sixteen to twenty-four years of age were employed, compared to 60 percent of high school completers who were not enrolled in school.

Second, even if they find a job, dropouts earn substantially less than high school graduates. In 2008, the median annual earnings of high school dropouts working full-time over an entire year were 22 percent less than those of high school graduates. Over their working lives, dropouts earn $260,000 less than high school graduates.

Dropouts’ poor economic outcomes are due in part to their low levels of education; yet dropouts can, and sometimes do, return to school. Almost two-thirds of eighth-grade students who dropped out of school before their originally scheduled graduation date in 1992 completed either a regular high school diploma (19 percent) or a GED or alternative certificate (43 percent) by the year 2000. And dropouts who earned a high school diploma were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education than students who did not complete high school (60 percent versus 15 percent). Nonetheless, dropouts as a group are much less likely to enroll in postsec-
ondary education than high school graduates, even though most states al-
allow dropouts to enroll in community colleges without a high school di-
ploma. Thus, dropouts’ poor economic prospects are due not simply to
the fact that they fail to finish high school, but also to their continued
underinvestment in education over their lifetime.

Dropouts experience other negative outcomes. They have poorer health
and higher rates of mortality than high school graduates; they are more
likely than graduates to engage in criminal behavior and be incarcerated
over their lifetimes. For instance, black male dropouts have a 60 percent
probability of being incarcerated over their lifetime, a rate three times
higher than for black male graduates. Dropouts are also more likely to re-
quire public assistance and are less likely to vote. Although the observed re-
relationship between dropping out and these economic and social outcomes
does not necessarily imply a causal relationship, a growing body of research
evidence has demonstrated one. This suggests that efforts to reduce dropout
rates would, in fact, reduce these negative economic and social outcomes.

The negative outcomes from dropouts generate huge social costs to citizens
and taxpayers. Federal, state, and local governments collect fewer taxes from
donuts. The government also subsidizes the poorer health, higher criminal
activity, and increased public assistance of dropouts. One recent study esti-
mated that each new high school graduate would generate more than $200,000
in government savings, and that cutting in half the dropout rate from a sin-
gle group of twenty-year-olds would save taxpayers more than $45 billion.

A second reason for the growing concern about the dropout problem is
demographic. The proportion of students who are racial, ethnic, and lin-
guistic minorities, who come from poor families, and who live in single-
parent households—all factors that research has shown are associated with
school failure and dropping out—is increasing in the nation’s schools. The
most profound change is the growth of the Hispanic school-age population,
which is projected to grow from 11 million in 2006 to 28 million in 2050, an
increase of 166 percent, while the non-Hispanic school-age population is
projected to increase by just 4 percent over this same period. Because the
rate of high school failure is higher among Hispanics and it improved more
slowly in the 1990s than for whites and blacks, the increasing proportion of
Hispanics in the school-age population could increase the overall number
of dropouts even with marginal improvements in the dropout rate.

A third reason is the growing push for accountability in the nation’s
public schools that has produced policies to end social promotion (the
practice of promoting a student to the next grade level despite low achievement) and to institute high school exit exams that could increase the number of students who fail to complete high school.32

A final reason for widespread concern over dropping out is that it is related to a host of other social problems facing adolescents today. As noted by the Forum on Adolescence, created by the National Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council to bring authoritative, nonpartisan research to bear on policy issues facing adolescents and their families:

One of the important insights to emerge from scientific inquiry into adolescence in the past two decades is that problem behaviors, as well as health-enhancing ones, tend to cluster in the same individual, and these behaviors tend to reinforce one another. Crime, dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy and childbearing, and drug abuse typically are considered separately, but in the real world they often occur together. Teenagers who drink and smoke are more likely to initiate sex earlier than their peers; those who engage in these behavior patterns often have a history of difficulties in school.33

If students face such a bleak future by dropping out of school, why do they do it? The question defies an easy answer.

Dropouts themselves report a wide variety of reasons for leaving school, including those related to school, family, and work.34 The most specific reasons cited by tenth graders who dropped out in 2002 were “missed too many school days” (44 percent); “thought it would be easier to get a GED” (41 percent); “getting poor grades/failing school” (38 percent); “did not like school” (37 percent); and “could not keep up with schoolwork” (32 percent). But these reasons do not reveal the underlying causes of why students quit school, particularly those causes or factors in elementary or middle school that may have contributed to students’ attitudes, behaviors, and school performance immediately preceding their decision to leave school. Moreover, if many factors contribute to this phenomenon over a long period of time, it is virtually impossible to demonstrate a causal connection between any single factor and the decision to quit school.

Although for the most part existing research is unable to identify unique causes, a vast empirical research literature has examined numerous predictors of dropping out of and graduating from high school. The empiri-
Introduction

cal research comes from a number of social science disciplines and has identified two types of factors: (1) individual factors associated with students themselves, such as their attitudes, behaviors, school performance, and prior experiences; and (2) contextual factors found in students’ families, schools, and communities.

**Individual Factors.** The research has identified a wide variety of individual factors that are associated with dropping out. Attitudes and behaviors during high school predict dropping out. Dropout rates are higher among students who have low educational and occupational aspirations. Absenteeism, misbehavior in school, and pregnancy are also related to dropping out. Finally, poor academic achievement is a strong predictor of dropping out. Together, these factors support the idea that dropping out is influenced by both the social and the academic experiences of students in high school.

In addition to these proximal factors, a number of distal factors prior to entering high school are associated with dropping out. One is student mobility. Both *residential* mobility (changing residences) and *school* mobility (changing schools) increase the risk of dropping out of high school. Student mobility may represent a less severe form of student disengagement or withdrawal from school. That is, students may change schools in an attempt to find a more suitable or supportive school environment before quitting school altogether. For example, one study found that students typically attend two or more high schools before dropping out.

Another distal factor is retention, or being held back a grade in school. Although retention may have some positive impact on academic achievement in the short run, numerous studies have found that it greatly increases the likelihood that students will drop out of school. Finally, a number of long-term studies have found that lack of early academic achievement and engagement (e.g., failing courses, absenteeism, misbehavior) in elementary and middle school predicts withdrawal from high school.

While a large array of individual attitudes, behaviors, and aspects of educational performance influence dropping out and graduating, these individual factors are shaped by the institutional settings where children live. As noted by the Forum on Adolescence, “Another important insight of scientific inquiry is the profound influence of settings on adolescents’ behavior and development.” This perspective is common in such social science disciplines as economics, sociology, and anthropology, and more recently
has been incorporated in an emerging paradigm in developmental psychology called *developmental behavioral science.* This paradigm recognizes that the various settings or contexts in which children live—families, schools, and communities—all shape their attitudes, behaviors, and experiences (see Figure 1.1). For example, the National Research Council Panel on High-Risk Youth (1993) concluded that too much emphasis has been placed on “high-risk” youth and not enough on the high-risk settings in which they live and go to school. Similarly, a 2004 review of the literature on childhood poverty identified a wide variety of family, school, and community environmental factors that impede the development of poor children. Both reviews reflect the growing emphasis on understanding how these contexts shape educational outcomes.

This new perspective has important implications for studying and understanding the problem of school dropouts. By studying the experiences of dropouts in particular settings, anthropologists have long illustrated the

*Figure 1.1.* The influence of context on adolescent development over time. 
importance of the family, school, and community contexts in understanding dropouts. Recent developments in statistics have also allowed quantitative researchers to study the influence of context, particularly the school setting, on academic performance across large numbers of schools. Relatively little of this work, however, has specifically focused on dropouts.

Nonetheless, there is a growing body of research that has identified an array of factors in families, schools, and communities that affect a child’s likelihood of dropping out of school.

**Contextual Factors.** Among the three types of contextual factors, families are the most critical. Family background is widely recognized as the single most important contributor to success in school. Socioeconomic status, most commonly measured by parental education and family income, is a powerful predictor of school achievement and dropout behavior. Parental education influences students’ aspirations and educational support (e.g., help with homework), while family income provides resources to support their children’s education, including access to better quality schools, after-school and summer school programs, and support for learning within the home (e.g., computers). In addition, students whose parents monitor and regulate their activities, provide emotional support, encourage independent decision-making (practicing what is known as authoritative parenting style), and are generally more involved in their schooling are less likely to drop out. Additionally, students living in single-parent homes and with stepfamilies are more likely to drop out of school than students in two-parent families.

Schools are a second contextual factor. It is widely acknowledged that schools exert powerful influences on student achievement, including dropout rates. Four types of school characteristics influence student performance, including the propensity to drop out or to graduate:

1. **Social composition,** such as the characteristics of students attending the schools, particularly the socioeconomic composition of the student body.
2. **Structural characteristics,** such as size, location, and school control (public traditional, public charter, private).
3. **School resources,** such as funding, teacher quality, and the student–teacher.
4. **Policies and practices,** such as the academic and social climate.
School characteristics influence dropout behavior in two ways. One way is indirectly, by creating conditions that influence student engagement, which can lead to students’ voluntarily withdrawing from school due to boredom, poor attendance, or low achievement. Another way is directly, through explicit policies and conscious decisions by school personnel that lead to students’ involuntarily withdrawing from school. Schools may enact rules and/or take actions in response to low grades, poor attendance, misbehavior (such as zero-tolerance policies), or exceeding the compulsory schooling age that lead to suspensions, expulsions, or forced transfers. This form of withdrawal is school-initiated and contrasts with the student-initiated form mentioned previously. Some schools, for example, contribute to students’ involuntary departure from school by systematically excluding and discharging “troublemakers” and other problematic students.45

In addition to families and schools, communities and peer groups can influence students’ withdrawal from school. Differences in neighborhood characteristics help explain disparities in dropout rates among communities, apart from the influence of families.46 Some neighborhoods, particularly those with high concentrations of African-Americans, are communities of concentrated disadvantage with extremely high levels of joblessness, family instability, poor health, substance abuse, poverty, welfare dependency, and crime.47 Disadvantaged communities may influence child and adolescent development through the lack of resources (playgrounds and parks, after-school programs) or negative peer influences.48 Community residents may also influence parenting practices over and above parental education and income. Students living in poor communities may also be more likely to have dropouts as friends, which increases the likelihood of dropping out of school.

Settings are important in influencing dropout behavior, but similar settings also affect individuals differently. Why is it that some students persist in school while living in poor families or attending “bad” schools? These different outcomes arise not only because of so-called objective differences in individuals—intelligence, race, or family situation—but also because of how individuals view or interpret their conditions. Thus, dropping out of school cannot be understood simply by studying the conditions of families and schools, or even the behaviors of students, but must also be understood by studying the views and interpretations of those conditions and
behaviors by dropouts themselves. Anthropological studies of dropouts are based on this premise.

Finally, understanding why students drop out requires looking at school experiences and performance over a long period of time. Dropping out is more of a process than an event. Students don’t suddenly drop out of school. Many dropouts show patterns of early school failure—disruptive behavior, failing grades, repeating a grade—that eventually lead them to give up or be pushed out, like Cesar was.49

Knowledge about why students drop out suggests several things about what can be done to design effective dropout intervention strategies. First, because dropping out is influenced by both individual and institutional factors, intervention strategies can focus on either or both sets of factors. That is, intervention strategies can address the individual values, attitudes, and behaviors associated with dropping out, without attempting to alter the characteristics of families, schools, and communities that may contribute to those individual factors. Alternatively, intervention strategies can attempt to improve the environmental contexts of potential dropouts by providing resources and supports to strengthen or restructure their families, schools, and communities.

Second, because dropping out is associated with both academic and social problems, effective prevention strategies must focus on both areas.50 That is, if dropout prevention strategies are going to be effective, they must be comprehensive, providing resources and supports in all areas of students’ lives. Because dropouts leave school for a variety of reasons, services provided to them must be flexible and tailored to their individual needs.

Third, because the problematic attitudes and behaviors of students at risk of dropping out appear as early as elementary school, dropout prevention strategies can and should begin early in a child’s educational career. Dropout prevention programs often target high school or middle school students who may have already experienced years of educational failure or unsolved problems. Instead, early intervention may be the most powerful and cost-effective approach to dropout prevention.51

There are three alternative approaches for improving dropout and graduation rates:

1. Programmatic approaches involve creating programs that target a subset of students who are most at risk of dropping out (or have already done
so), by providing either supplemental services to students within an existing school program or a complete alternative school program within a comprehensive high school (school-within-a-school, such as an academy) or in a separate facility (alternative school).

2. **Comprehensive approaches** involve schoolwide reforms that attempt to change school environments to improve outcomes for all students. The most common approach is to reform existing schools by developing a comprehensive set of practices and programs locally or by adopting an externally developed comprehensive school reform (CSR) model. A second approach is to create new schools, by either establishing a new school locally or adopting an externally developed whole school model. The most popular type of new schools are charters—public schools that are established and managed outside the regular public education system, and that are freed from most regulations and requirements of regular public schools. The number of charter schools—half of which include high school grades—and charter school students more than tripled over the ten-year period from 1999–2000 to 2009–10. The third approach—which can be combined with the other two—is to create collaborative relationships between schools and outside government agencies and local community organizations to provide services and programs for students and their families.

3. **Systemic approaches** involve making changes to the entire educational system—what some scholars have labeled “systemic school reform”—under the assumption that such changes can transform how all schools function in the system and therefore have widespread impact. Systemic reform can occur at the federal, state, or local level of government.

All three approaches have a limited record of success.

The U.S. Department of Education established the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) in 2002 to review scientific evidence on the effectiveness of a variety of educational interventions, including dropout programs. In 2008, the WWC reviewed eighty-four studies of twenty-two dropout prevention (and recovery) programs and found only twenty-three studies of sixteen interventions that met their evidence standards—twelve of the programs were student-support or alternative education programs and four were CSR or new school models—and assessed their effectiveness in improving three student outcomes: (1) staying in school, (2) progressing in school, and (3) completing school. Of the twelve student support programs, five were judged to be effective in keeping students in
school, four were effective in helping students progress in school, and four were effective in helping students to complete school. Of the four CSR or new school models, only one was effective at keeping students in school, two were effective in helping students progress in school, and none was effective in helping students to complete school. Moreover, none of these four programs was effective in helping students earn a regular high school diploma; rather, they helped students earn an equivalent diploma by passing the General Educational Development (GED) test. This distinction is important for two reasons: first, research has demonstrated that students who earn a GED do not enjoy the same economic benefits as students who earn a regular high school diploma, and second, most educational accountability systems reward schools and districts only when students earn regular diplomas. Three other reviews of the research evidence on dropout interventions also found a limited number of effective programs.

Evidence on the effectiveness of systemic interventions is also mixed. Increasing the compulsory schooling age to eighteen helps to improve graduation rates, but increasing high school graduation requirements—such as adopting exit exams or a college preparatory curriculum for all students—does not. Creating alternative pathways in either the public or private sector for students to earn a high school diploma also shows mixed outcomes. In particular, several recent large-scale studies found that some charter schools outpace their traditional counterparts, while other charter schools trail behind.

There is more consistent and compelling evidence for two early interventions: preschool programs and class-size reduction in early elementary school. Both produce significant improvements in high school graduation rates.

Studies have examined not only the effectiveness of dropout prevention strategies but also their costs and economic benefits. One recent study found that five specific interventions—from preschool programs to a high school reform model—produced economic benefits that were two to three times their costs. These findings document the economic benefits of investing in proven dropout prevention interventions.

The remainder of this book explores the four dimensions of the dropout problem—the nature, consequences, causes, and solutions—in greater detail. In doing so, I uncover a number of dilemmas and complexities that make
understanding and solving America’s dropout crisis more difficult than it might seem.

I begin by providing a brief history of high schools and the varying requirements and pathways for graduating. Beginning with their inception in the nineteenth century, I examine the long-standing debate over the purposes and goals of high schools in the United States, from a selective institution preparing advantaged students for entry to college to a comprehensive institution preparing all students for college, careers, and citizenship. I also investigate an ongoing dilemma: What should the graduation requirements be for all students, even those who do not want to go to college? Under the mantra of “college for all,” states have been raising the academic requirements for earning a high school diploma to those required for entry into four-year colleges despite evidence that more than one-third of future jobs will require no training beyond high school.59

The next chapter examines the nature of the dropout problem. What does it mean to drop out and what is the relationship between dropping out and graduating? The relationship is more complex than it may seem—a student can drop out several times over his or her educational career but can graduate only once. Also, just because a student never withdraws from school doesn’t mean that he or she will eventually graduate. So dropping out and graduating are not opposite sides of the same coin. Another issue we’ll explore in the chapter is how to measure dropout and graduation rates. The topic is important—it is valuable to know how many students who enter a high school eventually graduate—yet measuring such a graduation rate accurately is actually quite difficult and has generated considerable controversy. The difficulty is due in part to inaccurate or incomplete data as well as to how the statistics are calculated. Accurate dropout and graduation statistics are also important for determining whether the problem is getting better or worse and which students and schools are doing better or worse.

The subsequent two chapters examine the economic and social consequences of dropping out, both for dropouts and for the larger society. It may seem more logical to examine the causes of dropping out before examining the consequences. But it is important first to document the impact of dropping out in order to show its widespread effect and the impact on society if the problem is not sufficiently addressed.

Dropouts suffer in a number of ways—they are less likely to find a job and, once employed, are less likely to earn enough money to live, com-
pared to more educated workers; they have poorer health; they are more likely to commit crimes and to be incarcerated; and they are less likely to vote. These consequences yield huge social costs. Yet while these disadvantages are well documented, the evidence is less clear that dropping out of school actually “causes” these outcomes. Some of the characteristics of dropouts that lead them to quit school—such as poor work habits or lack of motivation—may contribute to these poor outcomes outside of school. So it is often difficult to determine the causal connection between dropping out and subsequent outcomes. Nonetheless, a growing body of research evidence does find a causal connection, which supports the notion that reducing dropout rates and raising graduation rates may in fact improve the economic and social outcomes for dropouts.

The next two chapters examine the causes of dropping out. Here, too, the problem is complex. Research reveals a broad array of factors that influence a student’s likelihood of staying in school. Some immediately precede the decision to quit school, such as failing courses or skipping school. But others are more distant. For example, research shows that poor academic performance in middle school and even elementary school can decrease a student’s motivation in high school, which can lead to failing courses and skipping school, the more immediate precursors to dropping out. One important issue to consider is the extent to which factors that influence dropping out are similar to those that influence other forms of student achievement, such as test performance. Such information is critical in determining whether common reform strategies can be used to improve both graduation rates and test scores, or whether different reform strategies are required.

The next chapter examines past efforts to address the problem and why they have largely failed. Since the causes of dropping out are complex, so must the solutions be. In other words, there is no simple prescription for solving the nation’s dropout crisis. Like other educational outcomes, dropping out is only partially a result of what takes place in school. Consequently, the solution must involve more than schools. Yet most attempts to address the problem of school dropouts in the United States have focused on schools, and most of those attempts have relied on two strategies—mandating sanctions for students and schools to do better, and providing more money for dropout programs. And both strategies have largely been unsuccessful at solving the problem.

The final chapter discusses current efforts to address the nation’s dropout crisis, including the Obama administration’s efforts to turn around
the nation’s persistently lowest-achieving schools, and why those efforts are insufficient. I argue that substantially improving the nation’s graduation rate will require more fundamental reforms, such as redefining high school success to include a broader array of skills and abilities that have been shown to improve labor-market performance and adult well-being.

The book draws on a variety of evidence to examine these four dimensions of the dropout problem. Statistical data are used to provide a broad, factual overview, and research articles and reports provide evidence on the consequences, causes, and solutions.

The book also draws on my own experiences in conducting research on dropouts over the past thirty years, and two specific efforts to do something about it.

The first was a dropout intervention project in a Los Angeles middle school in the first half of the 1990s. The intervention was designed and implemented by a colleague, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education. The school was probably similar to many other urban schools across America. The students were mostly poor and predominantly Latino. Over the four years we worked there, we found it to be a place of little learning, much rejection, and senseless cruelty.

Our intervention project attempted to counter this environment for a small group of the most problematic and lowest-achieving youngsters in the school, including Cesar. Although originally designed to focus on problem solving, monitoring, and training, over time our intervention expanded to become more involved in support and advocacy for students and their families. We also worked much more with people in the community and came to realize that helping students succeed in school required us to work with them in all the arenas of their lives—schools, families, and communities. Through our own experiences, we “discovered” what notable academics were saying about how contexts shaped dropout behavior.

A rigorous evaluation of our intervention project showed that it was highly successful—that is, a much higher proportion of “our” students stayed in school than a comparable group of other students. More important, it gave us a chance to become closely acquainted with the more than one hundred students and their families whom we worked with over the four years of the project, and we gained valuable insights into how schools and community organizations often fail to provide the support
and nurturing “at-risk” students need, or worse yet, how they actively push students out. We also discovered that the highest-risk students we were working with required constant support to succeed in school, something we were unable to provide past the ninth grade. Consequently, only a third of the students we worked with in middle school ever completed high school.

A second effort to address the dropout problem is a current project I am directing, the California Dropout Research Project (CDRP). The project, which began in December 2006, was designed to synthesize existing research and undertake new research to inform policy makers and the larger public about the nature of—and effective solutions to—the dropout problem in California. To date, the project commissioned seventeen research studies and produced thirteen statistical briefs to investigate four facets of the issue: (1) the measurement and incidence of dropping out; (2) the educational, social, and economic costs of dropouts for individuals and the state; (3) the short-term and long-term causes of dropping out; and (4) possible solutions. The project also established the Policy Committee, composed of researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and a community activist. This committee issued a report on February 27, 2008, with a series of recommendations on what schools, districts, and the state should do to improve California’s high school graduation rate. I discuss these recommendations in the final chapter.

This project also yielded a valuable lesson: simply producing timely and useful information is insufficient to influence policy change. It is also necessary to disseminate the information and work with policy makers to enact legislation based on the policy recommendations. So the project undertook a multifaceted dissemination strategy. One facet was to make the research findings understandable and accessible to a large number of people—policy makers, educators, and a variety of stakeholders in this widespread problem. To reach this audience, we produced policy briefs—1,500-word summaries written for a lay audience—from each of the research reports. These briefs were distributed in print to all superintendents and legislators in California.

A second facet of the dissemination strategy was to create a website where project publications and other information on dropout efforts from across the United States were available. The project website currently attracts about 2,000 visitors a month, and to date the sixty-six project publications have been downloaded more than 50,000 times.
A third facet is to generate media exposure to publicize the work of the project and maintain a sense of urgency among the larger public about the need to address the problem. Through press releases, op-ed articles, and media events, the project has generated more than twenty television clips on major California news channels, thirty articles and editorials in the state’s major newspapers, and three op-ed articles.

Another lesson learned from this project was that to effect policy change involves working with individuals and organizations on the issue over an extended period of time. A key individual in California is Darrell Steinberg, who made high school dropouts the central focus of his legislative agenda after his election to the California Senate in November 2008. After his election he created the Senate Select Committee on High School Graduation to serve as a forum to educate fellow senators and the public about the dropout problem in California. Over the course of twelve months, the committee held five hearings that featured the work of CDRP. The senator also sponsored a series of bills addressing the dropout problem in California, three of which incorporated recommendations from CDRP’s Policy Committee, where the senator served as a member.

My personal experiences in these two efforts provide valuable insights into the challenges and difficulties in effecting change in both practice and policy designed to keep students from dropping out of school.

Finally, these sources are augmented with personal accounts and quotations from students and dropouts themselves. These accounts are drawn from a number of in-depth case studies that describe the ordeals and challenges facing young dropouts or would-be dropouts in America, including:

- Angela Valenzuela’s account of students in a Houston high school, Nilda Flores-González’s account of students in a Chicago high school and Michelle Fine’s account of students in a New York City high school.63
- Harriet Romo and Toni Falbo’s study of one hundred Latino students in Austin, Texas, as they progress through high school.64
- Deirdre Kelly’s story of students in two continuation high schools in California.65
- Mark Fleisher’s account of female gang members in Kansas City, Missouri.66
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- Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas’s study of poor single mothers in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{67}
- Mercer Sullivan’s study of youth crime and work in three Brooklyn neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{68}

The real story of dropouts is the story of individual young people, like Cesar. It is a story of their personal lives and histories, and, ultimately, their struggle to succeed.
NOTES

1. Introduction

1. The names of the student and of the school are pseudonyms. This account comes from a dropout-intervention program conducted by the author and a colleague in the school. See Katherine A. Larson and Russell W. Rumberger, “ALAS: Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success,” in Staying in School: A Technical Report of Three Dropout Prevention Projects for Middle School Students with Learning and Emotional Disabilities, ed. H. Thornton (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration, 1995).


8. Special-education students are entitled to receive services for a specified number of years, often until they reach age twenty-one. They may exit school at that time with a regular diploma, an alternative diploma, a certificate of attendance, or no certificate. See Snyder and Dillow, Digest of Education Statistics 2010, table 117.

9. Russell W. Rumberger, Tenth Grade Dropout Rates by Native Language, Race/Ethnicity, and Socioeconomic Status (Santa Barbara: University of California
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20. The largest of these was the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP), which funded $294 million in targeted and school reform programs from 1989 to 1996. An evaluation of the last and largest phase of the program found that most programs had little impact on reducing dropout rates. See Mark Dynarski and Philip Gleason, *How Can We Help? What We Have Learned from Federal Dropout-Prevention Programs* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, 1998).


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26. Ibid., Figure 2.


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36. Rumberger and Larson, “Student Mobility.”


43. See Rumberger and Lim, *Why Students Drop Out of School*. Rumberger and Lim reviewed 203 empirical studies from academic journals published over the 25-year period from 1983 to 2007. The summary in the text is based on that review.


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56. For example, the federal accountability established under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requires states to improve high school graduation rates where only regular diplomas are counted. See “Elementary and Secondary Education: A Uniform Comparable Graduation Rate,” www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/reg/proposal/uniform-grad-rate.html (accessed February 15, 2011).


59. Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018 (Washington, DC: Center for Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University, 2010), http://cew.georgetown.edu (accessed January 17, 2011), Figure 2.2.

60. For a detailed description of the project, see Larson and Rumberger, “ALAS: Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success.”


62. For more information, visit the project website, www.cdrp.ucsb.edu (accessed February 15, 2011).

63. Angela Valenzuela, Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999);
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2. The Varying Requirements and Pathways for Completing High School


6. This account is taken from Dorn, Creating the Dropout, 44.


9. As quoted in Tyack, The One Best System, 188.


11. As quoted in Dorn, Creating the Dropout, 41.

12. All the material in this paragraph is taken from Dorn, Creating the Dropout, 42.

13. Tyack, The One Best System, 204.