What Can Be Done to Reduce the Dropout Rate?

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What can be done to design and implement effective dropout intervention strategies? The review of the research literature in the earlier chapter, "Why Students Drop Out of School," suggests several approaches. First, because dropping out is influenced by both individual and institutional factors, intervention strategies can focus on either or both sets of factors. For example, intervention strategies can address the individual values, attitudes, and behaviors that are associated with dropping out without attempting to alter the characteristics of the families, schools, and communities that may contribute to those individual factors. Many dropout-prevention programs pursue such programmatic strategies by providing dropouts with additional resources and supports to help them stay in school. Alternatively, intervention strategies can focus on attempting to improve the environmental contexts of potential dropouts by providing resources and supports to strengthen or restructure their families, schools, and communities. Such systemic strategies are often part of larger efforts to improve the educational and social outcomes of at-risk students more generally. Both strategies are discussed in more detail below.

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

Third, because the problematic attitudes and behaviors of students at risk of dropping out are found in elementary school, dropout-prevention strategies must begin early in a child's educational career. Dropout-prevention programs often target high school or middle school students who have already experienced years of educational failure or trapped problems.
**Programmatic Approaches**

There are two programmatic approaches to preventing dropouts: the Academic and the Social. The Academic approach is characterized by a focus on improving academic performance, while the Social approach targets the social and emotional needs of students. Both approaches are used in schools across the country, and they are often implemented in combination.

**Supplemental Programs**

One example of a supplemental program is the Achievement for Everyone through Academic Success (A.E.A.S.) program. This program was designed to help students who are at-risk for dropping out of school. The program focuses on providing academic support, counseling, and other services to help students stay in school and succeed.

**Los Angeles**

In Los Angeles, the A.E.A.S. program was implemented in several high schools, and it has shown promising results. The program has helped many students stay in school and improve their academic performance. However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of the program may vary depending on the specific needs of each school and the students it serves.
The primary institutions that serve youth—health, schools, employment, training—are crucial and we must begin with helping them respond more effectively to contemporary adolescent needs. Effective responses will involve pushing the boundaries of these systems, encouraging collaborations between them and reducing the number of adolescents whose specialized problems cannot be met through primary institutions. (p. 193)

Although the promise of systemic solutions to the dropout problem is great, the reality is sobering. The reason is simply that systemic changes are extremely difficult to achieve because they involve making fundamental changes in the way institutions work, both individually and within the system of which they are a part. Despite the difficulty of making such changes, there are examples of effective institutional changes, particularly in schools that have been successful in improving the graduation rates of high-risk students.

One well-known example is Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) in New York City (van Huisden Hale, 2000). The school enrolls 450 public school students in grades 7 through 12, most of whom are from low-income families and many of whom have a history of average or below-average academic achievement. No selection criteria, tests, or interviews are required to attend the school, which is supported by public education funds. Costs per student are the same as other public high schools.

The school offers an intellectually rigorous and creative education normally associated with elite private schools. Classes are small, averaging 20 students, and the day is organized into two-hour periods, allowing teachers and students enough time to engage in concentrated work in specific areas. Students take two main subject groups: mathematics and science, and social studies and the humanities. The school offers both interdisciplinary college-preparatory courses and career-oriented apprenticeships. It has established high standards and clear expectations for its students. Student performance is regularly assessed through a process in which students explain their work and are critiqued. To graduate, they must present seven academic projects in specified subjects over two years and defend them before committees of students, teachers, and other adults, much as a Ph.D. candidate defends a thesis.

The school has developed beneficial relationships with parents and the community, and has worked overtime to engage with and involve parents in the school and in their own child's schooling. School leaders have also formed a number of partnerships with community agencies. In addition, the school has a community service requirement where students spend one semester working in community service jobs.

According to CPESS codirector Brigitte Helvrett, four specific practices support the school's success:

- articulation and maintenance of a clear vision and mission that the staff carries out
- goal-setting in line with the vision
- allocation of instructional resources to keep class size small
- providing time for ongoing, job-embedded professional development

The school maintains its progress and continuously improves itself through an internal democratic process. The staff develops curricula, assessments, and the criteria for earning a CPESS diploma. They are also held accountable for maintaining school standards.

Student achievement data documents the school's success. Only 5 percent of the students drop out during their high school years, and more than 90 percent of Central Park East's graduates go on to college. Students have high attendance rates and a low incidence of violence.

Case studies of other schools have been able to identify effective schools and describe the salient features that enable them to keep students enrolled and eventually graduate. These features are similar to those that have been identified for "effective" schools more generally (e.g., Newman, 1993; Putney & Smith, 1985). While the list of specific features varies from one author to another (e.g., Newman, 1993; Putney & Smith, 1985; Wehage et al., 1989), they essentially address two basic features of schools: the commitment and competencies of the people (teachers, administrators, and staff) and the organizational structure (size, staffing ratio, curriculum design, services, etc.). While it remains unclear whether one feature must change before the other, both appear to be necessary. For example, simply adopting "progressive" structural changes, such as site-based management or team teaching, may do little if teachers do not have the requisite commitment and competencies (Newman, 1993). At the same time, certain organizational features, such as a smaller school size and shared decision-making, may be necessary to develop and support teachers' commitments to the institution and to the students it serves (Wehage et al., 1989). What also remains unclear is the extent to which it may be necessary to recruit teachers and staff with the necessary commitment and competencies before creating a supportive structure.

Research has been able to identify the features of effective secondary schools. Yet while identifying such features is the first step in the school reform
process (Putney & Smith, 1985), the next step is much harder and does far less to elicit school reform than it has in the past. Reforms that 250

identified school policies and tactical intransigence to reduce dropouts rates in urban high schools, in which the study of 250 urban high schools that were attempting major school reform programs based on the effective schools literature, Louis & Miles (1990) found widespread improvement in a number of areas, such as student behavior and student and staff morale. But even among programs that had implemented their programs for several years and enjoyed improvements in student achievement, improvement in dropout rates was "rarely achieved to matter how long a program had been in existence" (Louis & Miles, 1990, p. 49).

While efforts to restructure secondary schools to reduce dropout rates have proved elusive, so too have efforts to reform other institutions that serve at-risk youth. One ambitious systemic reform effort was the New Futures Initiative, promoted and funded by the Annie E. Casey foundation beginning in 1988. New Futures was an attempt to build new collaborative structures among existing public and private institutions in five cities (Dayton, Ohio; Lawrence, Massachusetts; Little Rock, Arkansas; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Savannah, Georgia) to address the problems of at-risk youth, including dropping out of school. The key strategy was to establish an oversight collaborative in each city with representation from public and private sector agencies to "identify youth problems, develop strategies, and set timelines for achieving these problems, coordinate joint agency activities, and restructure educational and social services" (White & Weilglage, 1995, p. 24). The collaboratives also included case managers who 1) brokered services among the disparate agencies serving at-risk youth and their families; 2) served as advocates for at-risk youth; and 3) served as the "eyes and ears" of the collaboratives by providing information and feedback to the group about what reforms were needed.

Evaluations of this ambitious, systemic reform effort found that it did little to reduce dropout rates and other problems of at-risk youth (Weilglage, Smith, & Lipuma, 1992; White & Weilglage, 1995). White and Weilglage (1995) found several generic problems in trying to establish community collaborations:

- Slippage between policy and action because case managers were generally unsuccessful in overruling the " turf battles" among existing agencies and in getting collaboratives to address them;
- Divided over reform policies because of fundamental disagreements over the definitions, causes, and remedies to problems;
- Disjuncture between policy and community conditions because of the top-down organization of the collaboratives that resulted in an incomplete understanding of the problems and hence ineffective policies.

These problems, clearly evident in New Futures school reforms, paralleled those found in the earlier evaluation of restructured schools. In particular, "more educators in New Futures schools believed that the problems that created at-risk students were problems inside the students, not inside the school and its curriculum" (Weilglage et al., 1992, p. 73). Hence, as found in the other systemic reform efforts, there was little incentive or support for changing the fundamental functioning of schools.

CONCLUSION

The United States does seem to have the capacity to reduce school dropouts and eliminate disparities among racial and ethnic groups, or at least has the potential to do so. Capacity requires technical expertise to develop and implement effective dropout prevention and recovery programs. A number of research models have been developed, implemented, and evaluated to demonstrate this expertise. These programs models range from early intervention programs serving preschool student, to supplemental yet comprehensive middle school programs, to alternative middle and high school programs. But to achieve widespread improvement in the dropout problem requires both systemic and programmatic solutions. And here the expertise does not yet exist. While individual effective schools and their relevant features have been identified, large-school systemic solutions to the dropout problem require resources, technical expertise, and incentives to restructure existing schools (Hannheke & Finkenauer, 1996). Such solutions have been tried, but have not succeeded. Research suggests why systemic reforms of schools and other agencies serving youth are problematic, but not how to address the problems. In their review of the New Futures initiative, White and Weilglage (1995) in fact conclude that institutional change is too difficult, and instead argue for a strategy of building social capital among community members:
REFERENCES


NOTES


Interpreting the Evidence from Recent Federal Evaluations of Dropout-Prevention Programs: The State of Scientific Research

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Beginning in the late 1980s, the U.S. Department of Education conducted three extensive evaluations of the effectiveness of programs to reduce high school dropout rates. The programs and the evaluations were supported by funds from the Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act and two phases of the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP), one operating from 1989 to 1993, the other from 1991 to 1996. Together, the three evaluations studied more than 100 dropout-prevention programs, and rigorous evaluation designs were used for 30 of these programs. There have been very few large-scale evaluations of solutions to the dropout problem.

Findings from the three evaluations show that most programs did not reduce dropout rates by statistically significant amounts, but some programs did improve some outcomes: three programs (funded in the second phase of the SDDAP) that prepared students who had already dropped out to get the General Education Development certificate improved GED-completion rates; an alternative high school on a community college campus reduced dropout rates; and several alternative middle schools reduced dropout rates.

The three evaluations were based on quasi-experimental studies, two of which relied on random assignment techniques to measure program effects reliably. Considering the extent and rigor of these evaluations, it is reasonable to ask whether their findings comprise a menu of program approaches that a policymaker or education program developer could use to select an effective dropout-prevention program for their school or district.