

# **KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief**

## **Reducing the High School Dropout Rate**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
July 2005

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In recent years, our nation has made significant strides in reducing the dropout rate. In 2003, the status dropout rate in the US was 8 percent—a 27 percent improvement over the year 2000 rate of 11 percent. During that period, the dropout rate improved in 38 states and the District of Columbia, rose in 9 states, and remained the same in 3 others. In 2003, it ranged from a low of 4 percent in New Jersey, North Dakota, and Wisconsin, to a high of 12 percent in Arizona and Louisiana. (For an overview of current ways of defining graduation and dropout rates see Page 5 “Gauging the dropout problem”).

Despite progress, there is much work to be done. Nationwide in 2003, there were more than 1.1 million teens between the ages of 16 and 19 who were not in school and did not have high school diplomas. Moreover, an intensive focus is needed on improving the educational prospects of students from ethnic and racial minority groups in our nation’s central cities. In 2003, the dropout rate for non-Hispanic white teens was 6 percent, compared to 8 percent for black/African American, 11 percent for American Indian and Alaskan native, and 15 percent for Hispanic/Latino teens.

Continued efforts are crucial because while education has always played a role in determining Americans’ occupational and economic prospects, its influence has never been greater. Over the past two decades, people without high school diplomas have suffered an absolute decline in real income and have dropped further behind individuals with more education. The result is a pattern of increased economic marginalization for those with the least education. Dropouts who subsequently complete the requirements for a General Educational Diploma (GED) fare somewhat better than those who do not, but their earning capacity remains very limited (Orfield et al., 2004; Murnane and Tyler, 2000).

For the nation’s ethnic and racial minorities, particularly Hispanics and African Americans, the consequences of dropping out are even more daunting. At the start of *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis*, Gary Orfield of Harvard’s Civil Rights Project warns that, “There is a high school dropout crisis far beyond the imagination of most Americans, concentrated in urban schools and relegating many thousands of minority children to a life of failure” (Orfield, et al., 2004, p. 9). Orfield cites a 2003 study of the Chicago employment market

which showed that more than half of adult male African American high school dropouts were unemployed (Orfield et al., 2004). Other recent studies report a widening gap between the graduation rates of white students and that of other groups, including students of racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, students living in poverty, and students with limited English proficiency. In *Losing our Future: How Minority Youths are being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*, the authors contend that "...official 'dropout' statistics neither accurately count nor report the vast numbers of students who do not graduate from high school." Given these findings, the current challenge is two-fold: to reduce the dropout rate, particularly for minority students in large city schools, and to press for graduation data that paint an accurate picture of the problem (see "Gauging the Dropout Problem.")

This indicator brief outlines five broad strategies for reducing the dropout rate:

- **Increase the holding power of high schools.**
- **Address the underlying causes of dropping out.**
- **Address the needs of the groups at highest risk of dropping out.**
- **Strengthen school readiness.**
- **Strengthen the skills and understanding of the adults who affect teens' motivation and ability to stay in school.**

#### **1. Increase the holding power of high schools.**

"Dropping out of school is easy." This is the conclusion of researchers who conducted a large-scale review of dropout prevention programs, collecting data for more than 10,000 students. They add, "Students who have done it say they simply stopped going to school one day. Some said they dropped out because they thought school principals or teachers wanted them to. Others said they dropped out because of circumstances beyond their control. Either way, they may have encountered little resistance from others around them" (Dynarski & Gleason 1999, p. 1).

- **Root out policies that tacitly permit dropping out or encourage students to leave school.** Many teens say that they were encouraged by administrators or teachers to stop coming to school. Some researchers see evidence of a "push-out" syndrome in many schools, where teachers and administrators make little effort to hold onto potential dropouts (Orfield et al., 2004; Druian & Butler, 2001). Case in point: a report by the Hispanic Dropout Project concluded that schools often make active efforts to retain Hispanic students until they have been counted in that year's census. Once schools have

received their state monies for the year, there are no sanctions for dropouts, and schools can experience relief from overcrowding as their enrollment decreases (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998). The report noted that district and state assessment policies can provide incentives for schools to drop low-performing students from their rosters including those with limited proficiency in English, a need for special education services, or other academic needs. In *Losing our Future: How Minority Youths are being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*, Orfield and his colleagues concluded that "...without more powerful incentives for schools to 'hold onto' students through graduation, the 'push-out syndrome' is likely to grow more severe."

- **Strengthen accountability for keeping young people on track.** One strategy for reducing the dropout rate is to make the issue part of administrators' performance evaluations (Clowes, 1999). However, so many factors affect the dropout rate that educators should not be held solely responsible for keeping students in school. Nor should the dropout rate be the only method of gauging progress in serving youth. This was a key lesson of Casey's New Futures project. As a participant in the Dayton program noted, "We didn't look at child welfare, juvenile court problems, [or other issues]...Educators felt they were under fire and were the only system being measured." By only measuring educational outcomes, a report on New Futures concluded, the program sent the message that "the schools were accountable, and everyone else could stand outside the fray and snipe" (AECF, 2001).

- **Offer students the assistance and opportunities they need to stay in school.** When students are failing academically, alienated from school emotionally, or on the verge of dropping out, they need access to services that can help them and their families deal with personal and academic problems. Many approaches are possible, such as counseling, mentoring, and changes in curriculum. The key is for every school to ask what it would take to keep its students engaged through graduation, and to follow through with the systemic changes needed to make that possible.

## Gauging the dropout problem

At first glance, measuring the dropout rate would seem to be a straightforward process. After all, some students graduate; others do not. But in fact, many yardsticks have been developed—because students take many routes through high school and districts and states reward and record their progress in many ways.

*Who is a dropout?* It is not enough to count students who do not complete high school in a given school or district. Some of those students may transfer to other schools—public or private—or undertake home schooling. Some gain admission to college and leave high school early. Some are institutionalized (in jails, prisons, or hospitals).

*Who is a graduate?* Counting students who finish grade 12 is not sufficient. In all states, public school students who complete regular, standards-based programs receive high school diplomas. But other students may obtain equivalency credentials such as the GED. And some states offer non-diploma credentials to students who complete required courses but do not meet other requirements such as passing competency tests. Students in special education may receive alternative credentials when they meet all requirements set out in their Individual Education Plans.

*No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) regulations state that only recipients of regular, standards-based high school diplomas are to count as “graduates” for accountability purposes. When they report graduation rates, states awarding alternative credentials are expected to distinguish between diploma recipients and other completers. To date, some state accountability plans have drawn these distinctions, but others have been less specific.

In short, the problem is more complex than it would appear at first glance, and researchers have identified at least 70 different indicators of high school graduation, completion, and dropping out (Swanson, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are three main types of dropout rates (NCES, 2002).

**Event rate:** describes the proportion of students in a given age range who leave school each year without completing a high school program.

**Status rate:** provides a snapshot of young adults in a given age range who are not in school and have not completed a high school program.

**Cohort rate:** measures how many students starting a specific grade together drop out over time. This method is technically challenging because it requires tracking of individual students’ progress over time.

KIDS COUNT has used a **status rate**, reporting the percentage of young people, ages 16 to 19, who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school degree or a GED. This method holds high school completers to a lower standard than the federal NCLB law. However, states—not the federal government—determine what constitutes high school completion, and different states use different definitions. A more restrictive definition would therefore make it difficult to compare the high school dropout rate across states.

For all of the reasons suggested here—and many more—efforts to gauge the dropout problem in the United States are controversial. Some researchers believe that including those who earn GED and alternative credentials as high school completers creates an overly optimistic view of educational achievement. They point out that the high school completion rate remains a valuable indicator because high school graduates perform better in the job market than dropouts. But those who earn GED and alternative credentials perform at lower levels, on average, than other high school completers. They cite other factors that tend to inflate high school completion rates commonly reported by official sources. They say that sampling methods under-represent some segments of the population (such as incarcerated people). Self-reporting of graduation rates by districts, schools, or households may also skew results (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

• **Stress the full participation of youth.** Over the last decade, the emphasis in the field of youth development has shifted from assuring that young people are problem-free to assuring that they are fully prepared. Now it is recognized that fully prepared is not enough. Young people need to be *fully participating* (Pittman, 2000). Some dropout prevention efforts are expanding opportunities for service learning. They are integrating an academic curriculum with structured time for organized service experiences that meet real needs in the community. Research shows that students who take part in high-quality service learning demonstrate increased motivation to learn (resulting in higher attendance rates and academic performance) and a heightened sense of personal and social responsibility. They are also less likely to be involved in “risk” behaviors (Abravanel, 2003).

• **Gear dropout prevention efforts to the age and profile of the student.** Several models hold promise, including alternative middle schools; alternative high schools for students with motivation or academic potential; GED programs; or restructured schools and classrooms. However, none of these models will benefit every potential dropout. Middle school programs have found that an intensive approach—one that accelerates students’ progress to allow them to catch up with their age peers—helps more students stay in school. For high school students, programs that aim to keep them on track and in school may work for those who are motivated to succeed; for others, a GED program may be a more realistic route (Dynarski & Gleason, 1999). A comprehensive review of dropout prevention programs determined that the most successful are those that are individualized and inspire students to graduate by engaging them in school and learning. (Lehr, 2004).

• **Base policy and program design on solid evidence about why young people drop out of school in a particular locality.** Many factors affect the likelihood that teens will drop out of school. Economic stress, grade retention, misbehavior, frequent moves, teen pregnancy, low self-esteem, and high absenteeism are all associated with higher dropout rates, but different factors are at work in different places. The same remedy will not work in every community. Researchers have found that the risk factors commonly used by dropout-prevention programs to identify likely dropouts often do not predict accurately which students will not graduate (Dynarski & Gleason, 1999). To be effective, programs and policies need to identify and address local conditions or factors that raise the dropout

rate. This requires adequate research and analytic tools as well as the capacity to tailor programs to local conditions.

- **Strengthen students' understanding of the connection between education and job opportunities.** Some dropout prevention programs combine intensive, individualized basic skills development with work-related projects. Programs that include career guidance, work-based learning, career pathways, and technology instruction have been shown to be effective in keeping students in school (Stone, 2004). The goal is not only to enhance skills, but also to make clear the relationship between education, on one hand, and economic and job prospects on the other (Druian & Butler, 2001).

## **2. Address the underlying causes of dropping out.**

- **Promote awareness of the links between staying in school and the resources available to families and communities.** Researchers have demonstrated that the odds of dropping out are influenced by many forces beyond the classroom or school. Access to economic opportunity also affects the dropout rate: low-income students are three and a half times more likely to drop out than middle-income students (Children's Defense Fund, 2004). Researchers have identified an income threshold below which total years of schooling decreases significantly: roughly three times the official poverty line (Axinn, Duncan and Thornton, 1997). Children in families that experience persistent economic stress are more likely to drop out than those in families that experience intermittent stress. A 2004 National Center for Educational Statistics report based on the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 found that whether or not the high school dropouts in the group received either a diploma or GED by 2000 was influenced by their socioeconomic status. While more than 90 percent of the students with high socioeconomic status went on to finish high school, only about half of the students from the lowest socioeconomic status completed graduation requirements (NCES, 2004).

- **Address the social and emotional conditions associated with poverty.** Families who live in poverty are less able to supply the nutrition and materials needed for children's healthy development. They have less access to safe neighborhoods, good schools, appropriate recreational facilities and adequate health services. Moreover, children growing up in poverty have less access to learning resources (such as tutoring or enrichment programs) than their better off schoolmates. But it is not a simple lack of

buying power that makes children in low-income families more likely to drop out. Rather, the decision to leave school often stems from the social and psychological events surrounding poverty. In recent years, researchers have been examining the link between economic security and children's emotional status. They have shown that economic loss is associated with changes in parenting practices, with adverse consequences for children's emotional well-being. The family stress associated with poverty diminishes children's likelihood of finishing high school (Teachman, Paasch, Day & Carver, 1997). Conflicts about money appear to have a particularly negative influence on boys (Conger, Conger and Elder, 1997). More research is needed to shed light on the specific aspects of the home environment that reduce low-income children's chances of educational success. As they develop policies and programs, decision makers need to know whether children's chances of finishing school are predicted by particular patterns of parent-child interaction, the availability of educational materials, or some combination of these and other factors.

• **Focus resources on those young people who face multiple risk factors.** KIDS COUNT has established a Family Risk Index that identifies as a "high-risk child" one who lives in a family with four or more of these risk factors: 1) Child is not living with two parents 2) Household head is high school dropout; 3) Family income is below the poverty line; 4) Child is living with parent(s) who is underemployed; 5) Family is receiving welfare benefits; 6) Child does not have health insurance. In March 2000, 27 percent of the 16-to-19-year-olds in the high-risk category were high school dropouts (not a high school graduate and not currently in school). For teens not in the high-risk category the dropout rate was 7 percent (AECF, 2001).

The KIDS COUNT 2004 Data Book also identifies a sub-group of young Americans who are at greater risk than any others. A common thread among these "most disconnected youth"—young people who are in foster care, are involved in the juvenile justice system, have children of their own and did not graduate from high school—is school failure (AECF, 2004).

• **Address the linkage between residential mobility and dropping out.** Stable housing can matter as well: children's likelihood of completing high school diminishes with each move they make (Weissbourd, 1996). Schools and districts may therefore want to

consider policies and programs aimed at helping students from highly mobile families stay in school.

- **Address minor problems before they snowball into the kinds of issues that keep students out of school.** Problems that seem minor can become impediments to school attendance, leading young people to drop out. Lost eyeglasses that are not replaced, persistent teasing that is not addressed, or conflict with a single teacher can begin a chain of events that ends with a young person leaving school (Weissbourd, 1996).

### **3. Address the needs of those groups at highest risk of dropping out.**

Each year, across the nation hundreds of thousands of students leave school without graduating. These are young people of every demographic description, but the problem is more common among students of color and those who attend large, urban, segregated schools (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Black students are more likely to drop out than white students: the difference between black and white dropout rates narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s, but has remained constant over the last decade. Hispanic youth continue to have a high dropout rate when compared to whites, blacks, or Asian/Pacific Islanders school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Students with disabilities are more likely than other students to drop out. Several recent studies have challenged the NCES data and contend that the national dropout rate is actually significantly higher, particularly for poor and minority students (Vail, 2004).

- **Focus intensively on strategies to help Hispanic youth stay in school.** Hispanic students are more than twice as likely as black students and more than three times as likely as white students to drop out of school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). In the mid-nineties, a task force appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education spent two years studying issues surrounding the Hispanic dropout problem and provided a set of policy-relevant recommendations. In its final report, the Hispanic Dropout Project offered these key recommendations: 1) Depoliticize education for Hispanic youth, separating it from debates about language policy or immigration. Move forward at the local, state, and national levels with a coherent educational agenda. 2) Fund public schools appropriately to upgrade physical facilities, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. 3) Streamline and make intelligible those policies that parents and children must follow. 4) Change or discard those school policies that tacitly permit dropping out or actually encourage Hispanic students to drop out. 5) Just as standards for content and

performance are critical in this age of education reform, districts and states should develop standards for school conditions, school and class size, and students' opportunities to learn. 6) Districts and state education agencies should design comprehensive strategies for dropout prevention tied to the states' standards and that take account of students' different needs at different points in their lives (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998).

• **Provide incentives and opportunities for students in high-poverty neighborhoods to succeed.** In these neighborhoods, education reform is not sufficient. Rather, reform must be augmented with social-capital and economic-development initiatives that look at the whole community and the incentives, rewards, and opportunities it offers for academic and occupational success. These initiatives need to find ways to increase employment, enterprise and role opportunities for the families and youth who reside there (AECF, 1995).

• **Focus intensively on dropout prevention for high school students with disabilities and other special needs.** Given high dropout rates for students with disabilities and other special needs, special education programs and policies designed for high school students need to be re-examined. This is particularly true in light of standards-based education reform. A key strategy of this movement is to increase graduation requirements. States have taken varied approaches to including students with disabilities in their efforts to raise standards. Some states have alternative exit documents such as "certificates of completion" for students with disabilities who do not meet standard graduation requirements. Many offer only a standard diploma, with requirements varying across states. States that require students to pass graduation examinations also vary with respect to requirements for students with disabilities.

The question remains: how will these reforms affect the ability of students with disabilities to graduate? As things stand, nearly one in three students with disabilities leaves school before graduation. Policy makers are grappling with difficult choices. Accommodating individual students' diverse learning needs within a framework of state standards can be difficult and often requires modification of standards, instruction, and/or assessments. When ad hoc adjustments are made at the local level, such modifications can weaken accountability. States can respond by building into accountability systems flexible policies to define appropriate modifications for use at the local level (National

Association of State Boards of Education, 2002). At the same time, research is needed to determine how the diverse approaches taken by different states affect long-term educational and employment outcomes for students with disabilities and other special needs.

#### **4. Strengthen school readiness.**

A growing body of evidence suggests that efforts to improve academic achievement and reduce the dropout rate need to begin long before children enter high school—or even middle school. Recent research suggests that high quality early childhood programs can enhance long-term outcomes for children.

• **Address families’ access to economic resources and human services in children’s early years.** Families’ economic situations affect children’s educational attainment throughout childhood. But low income is more strongly associated with dropping out when it occurs early in a child’s life than when it occurs in later childhood or adolescence

(Brooks-Gunn, Duncan and Maritato, 1997). Policies or programs that bolster family resources in the middle or high school years are not sufficient. Improving the effectiveness of the home as a learning environment is a key to promoting long-term school success (Druian & Butler, 2001).

• **In particular, improve access to health care, beginning with prenatal**

**care.** Maternal health and the availability of prenatal care influence children’s birth weight, which in turn affect children’s likelihood of dropping out. Students who had low birth weights are significantly more likely than other students to drop out of school; this

#### **What is a high-quality early education program?**

A recent review of the research (Future of Children, 2005) suggested that high-quality programs include five key components:

- 1) A high-quality learning environment with small class sizes, a low teacher-child ratio, and teachers with bachelor degrees and training in early childhood education, using a curriculum that is cognitively stimulating;
- 2) Training for teachers in identifying children with moderate to severe behavioral problems and working with them to improve their emotional and social skills;
- 3) Parent training to help adults at home reinforce positive school experiences;
- 4) Optional home visits, with an emphasis on identifying children’s health problems, helping parents get ongoing health care, and addressing problems at home that may impede good child development;
- 5) Alignment with kindergarten programs to ease transition to school for children, parents, and teachers.

is true even when comparisons are made among siblings growing up in the same household (Conley & Bennett, 2000).

- **Expand access to high-quality early education programs.** There is new evidence that high-quality preschool experiences can improve graduation rates. In 2001, an article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported on a large study that followed nearly a thousand children from low-income families who took part in the Chicago Child-Parent Center study in the mid-1980s. Most of the children were African American. It showed that “public investments in early educational programs in the first decade of life can contribute positively to children’s later success” (Reynolds et al., 2001). The study found that, compared with similar children who were not in the program, participants had higher educational attainment up to age 20. They stayed in school slightly longer, and were more likely to graduate from high school.

## **5. Strengthen the skills and understanding of the adults who affect teens’ motivation and ability to stay in school.**

Some young people do well and stay in school despite tough circumstances. Researchers studying their resilience have found that children need personal anchors—stable, positive emotional relationships with at least one parent or key person. Parents are the key people in youngsters’ lives, and they can benefit from family support efforts. Teachers and other adults can play an important role in fostering resilience. They may mentor students, either formally or informally. Or they may play a role by offering emotional support during hard times, acting as the student’s advocate when conflict arises in school or at home, or providing an opportunity to pursue a special talent or interest (Garbarino, 1995).

- **Expand access to parent education and family support programs geared to the challenges of raising adolescents.** While peers, teachers, coaches, and friends’ parents can take on added importance as children become teens, parents remain a powerful influence in promoting healthy development and keeping their children on track. Study after study shows strong correlations between strong parent-child relationships and graduation rates. However, relatively little attention has been paid to supporting the parents of adolescents (Simpson, 1997). Providing increased access to parent education

and family support programs can help parents negotiate conflicts or crises that can lead their children to leave school. These programs need effective outreach, curricula, staff development, evaluation, and linkages with other local services.

- **Use a variety of media and formats to offer more and better information to the parents of teens.** As researchers gather new findings and generate new knowledge about parenting adolescents, better ways of disseminating the information are needed. Stronger informational resources would benefit not only parents and teens, but also policy makers, health care providers, human services providers, religious leaders, advocates, and others.

- **Work with schools of education to recruit and prepare teachers who are motivated and able to teach students who have a history of failure.** A review of many federal dropout prevention initiatives showed that the effectiveness of programs for at-risk students depended more on the choice of teachers than the choice of curriculum (Dynarski & Gleason, 1999). At the same time, low-performing schools that serve poor and minority students tend to have fewer teachers trained in their subjects, and few states and districts have implemented strategies to close the gap (Ansell & McCabe, 2003). Moreover, teachers at high-poverty schools are less qualified and often leave after a few years (Orfield & Lee, 2005).

- **Provide ongoing staff development to teachers who work with at-risk youth.** Key characteristics of successful dropout prevention programs appear to be strong, sustained commitment on the part of teachers and strong leadership on the part of administrators (Druian & Butler, 1999). To maintain this level of commitment as well as expand knowledge and skills, school staff need ongoing support.

- **Involve teachers, parents, and teachers in the planning of dropout prevention programs.** Schools are often structured in ways that do not meet teens' learning needs, and restructuring efforts can increase their holding power. One obstacle to successful change initiatives is that grants are often written by one group and implemented by another. As a review of dropout prevention initiatives observed, "Enthusiasm for restructuring on the part of grant writers did not always translate into enthusiasm for restructuring on the part of teachers and principals, whose activities, roles, and relationships may be altered by restructuring" (Dynarski & Gleason 1999).

Many dropout prevention initiatives are now underway. They employ diverse strategies to increase the holding power of high schools, including smaller schools, counseling and support services, attendance monitoring, challenging curricula, accelerated learning strategies, culturally sensitive parental outreach, stronger links between middle and high schools, community service, and school-to-work programs. Some states have expanded compulsory education to include sixteen- or seventeen-year-olds. These efforts are important, but more must be done. Decades of research and practice have shown that when it comes to reducing the dropout rate, focusing on what happens in high schools is crucial but insufficient.

**For further information:**

Academy for Educational Development, Inc.  
Center for Youth Development and Policy Research  
(202) 884-8267  
[www.aed.org](http://www.aed.org)

Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk  
(410) 516-8800 (Johns Hopkins University) 202-806-8484 (Howard University)  
[www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/CReSPaR.html](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/CReSPaR.html).

Dropout Prevention Demonstration Program  
(202) 401-0113  
[www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/DropoutPrev/](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/DropoutPrev/)

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network  
(864) 656-2599  
[www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org)

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