ISSUE BRIEF

www.centerforcsri.org

June | 2006

DROPPING OUT Is Hard to Do

BY CRAIG D. JERALD

A wave of reports the last few years has called new attention to low graduation rates among America's high school students: Only seven in 10 ninth graders complete high school on time with a regular diploma, and among African-American and Latino students, the rate is closer to one half.[1] Last year, all 50 governors signed a compact to adopt a common measure for calculating completion rates, one much tougher than those that states have been using to measure progress under No Child Left Behind.

That means America's educators are about to be faced with a sizeable new challenge—fixing the nation's dropout problem. And they will have to tackle that challenge even as they *simultaneously* work to improve student achievement.

The notion that schools can significantly raise graduation rates runs counter to much conventional wisdom about dropouts. Many educators believe that dropping out mostly has to do with family difficulties, personal problems, or a simple lack of ambition—in other words, things that schools simply cannot control. And many believe that raising academic standards will inevitably drive down graduation rates.[2]

But the conventional wisdom is wrong. Although no one suggests that solving the dropout problem will be easy, there's plenty of evidence to suggest that it will be far from impossible. Personal factors play a role in whether students will drop out, of course, but so do school-related factors. And recent research shows that some high schools have much lower dropout rates than would be predicted based on the composition of their student bodies. Moreover, requiring students to work harder and complete a tougher academic curriculum might actually improve graduation rates rather than making them plummet, as so many educators fear.

Personal or Educational?

During the last few decades, many schools have taken up the mantra "all students can learn," and many educators have made it their own. But far fewer

educators are convinced that schools can have an impact on whether students stay in school and graduate, and many believe that dropping out is primarily or even entirely due to individual student factors that originate outside the schoolhouse doors. As one school principal told a writer for the *American School Board Journal,* "If you want to know why some students drop out, look at their parents—they pass their low aspirations on to their kids."[3]

One reason for such beliefs comes from research itself. For many years, researchers focused primarily on identifying personal or family factors that dropouts tend to have in common. Several decades worth of studies have documented that dropouts are more likely to be poor, minority, and male; come from single-parent families with a mother who dropped out of high school or have parents who are less involved in school; and have adult responsibilities themselves like jobs or spouses.

However, while students with those characteristics *are more likely* to drop out, the most immediate causes for leaving school are educational. Recent research has found that both poor academic performance and educational disengagement are reliable predictors of whether students will leave high school without a diploma. Students who earn failing grades and low test scores, who fall behind in course credits, and who are held back one or more times are much less likely to graduate. The same is true for students who exhibit high absenteeism, poor classroom behavior, and bad relationships with teachers and peers. Disengagement from school and poor academic performance often are closely related, with each reinforcing the other.

And, it turns out, those warning signs are easy to spot. Last year, several researchers studying the progress of Philadelphia students found that 50 percent of all eventual high school dropouts could be identified *as early as sixth grade* on the basis of just four educational indicators—low attendance, receiving a poor classroom behavior

mark from one or more teachers, failing mathematics, or failing English.[4]

Another study released last year found 81 percent of Chicago public high school freshmen who earn enough credits for promotion to 10th grade and also receive no more than one failing semester mark during ninth grade graduate on time from high school, compared with 22 percent of freshmen who do not achieve both of those things. Remarkably, those two indicators can be used to identify 85 percent of students who will eventually drop out of Chicago's public high schools.[5]

Moreover, when researchers survey high school students and dropouts themselves, educational factors consistently come out on top as reasons for leaving school. For example, a federally funded 1990 survey found out of 21 possible reasons, 51 percent of dropouts reported "I didn't like school" and 44 percent indicated "I was failing" as their top reasons. A team of researchers who further analyzed the results found that "in each of the racial/ethnic as well as gender groups, school-related factors are the most cited reasons for dropping out."[6]

A 2002 survey of the nation's high school students obtained similar results. When students who had ever considered dropping out of school were asked why, 76 percent said school was boring and 42 percent said they were not learning enough—responses that once again beat out a long list of other possibilities by a substantial margin.[7]

Some educators might contend that many students are bored because they have low aspirations, and it is low aspirations that cause disengagement and low grades. But teenage aspirations are higher than they have ever been. During the last 30 years, the relative wages of high school dropouts have plummeted as the economic payoff of postsecondary education and training has soared, and today's students seem to be getting the message. Recent surveys have

consistently found that about 80 percent of high school students expect to earn a college degree.[8]

And most dropouts soon realize they have made a grave mistake. A report released in March found: "In hindsight, young people who dropped out of school almost universally expressed great remorse for having left high school and expressed strong interest in re-entering school with students their age. [Eighty-one percent] said that graduating from high school was important to success in life."[9] True to their word, most dropouts don't simply give up but rather keep trying to earn a diploma, often cycling in and out of schools and programs several times.[10]

Schools Matter

Some educators might argue that even if students' educational experiences trump personal problems as the main reasons for leaving school, there is little they or their colleagues can do about it: Some students are just less likely to find school engaging, and some students are just more likely to fail academically. Indeed, during her tenure as director of planning in the Chicago Public Schools, Melissa Roderick, a University of Chicago professor and leading researcher on the dropout problem, observed that educators consistently decline to accept responsibility for low graduation rates:

> In meetings, […] educators argued vehe-
> mently that differences in the dropout rate
> across high schools were simply a reflection of
> differences in the students they served, and
> were not a result of any actual differences in
> the quality of a school's programs, teachers,
> or administrators.[11]

Roderick and several colleagues at the Consortium on Chicago School Research decided that such claims could be tested using hard data. In a report released last year, the Consortium showed that dropout rates actually vary widely across Chicago public high schools—*even after* researchers account for

a host of student risk factors, including race, gender, poverty, prior academic achievement, and whether students are overage when they enter ninth grade.[12] In other words, some schools with similar populations have much lower graduation rates than one would expect, and some have much higher. The same is true for rates of ninth-grade failure—the biggest predictor of dropping out in Chicago—and also rates of *recovery* from ninth-grade failure.[13]

What could account for the difference? Two recent studies conducted by University of Michigan researcher Valerie Lee and colleagues found that, other things being equal, high schools that have enrollments lower than 1,500 students, better interpersonal relationships among students and adults, teachers who are more supportive of students, and a more focused, academically rigorous curriculum exhibit lower dropout rates.[14]

In other words, high schools that combine high challenge with high support tend to have better "holding power." The benefits of those strategies are especially great for low-achieving, low-income students. And the "school effect" can be quite strong: For example, high schools that have highly supportive teachers cut the probability of dropping out in half.[15]

Clearly, the conventional wisdom is wrong: Schools do matter. The point is not to blame educators for the problem by saying schools alone are the "cause" of low graduation rates, but rather to show the positive implications of this research. Educators and administrators hold at least some of the levers necessary for raising graduation rates.

Moreover, the conventional wisdom about exactly *how* schools matter also is wrong. Many educators believe that only by lowering academic standards can educators ever hope to raise graduation rates. However, Lee's research shows that, other things being equal, high schools that offer a "constrained curriculum" with more—and more

challenging—academic courses and fewer general-track, remedial, and elective courses have *lower* dropout rates: "This finding flies in the face of those who say that high schools must offer a large number of non-demanding courses in order to keep uncommitted students in school."[16]

Other research suggests that if schools can combine greater academic rigor with greater real-world relevance in their curricula, even more students will be encouraged to stay in school. Surveys suggest that students are especially interested in the connection between what they are studying and the jobs they might take after high school.[17] In an effort to give students "the rigor without the mortis," some high schools are combining academic courses with career preparation. "My kids used to sit in class and say, 'When am I going to use the algebra?'" says Mary A. Fudge, the coordinator of technology integration at a Michigan high school that has begun teaming vocational/career teachers with mathematics teachers. Now, "math is a tool," she says. "It makes the academic work come alive."[18]

Some schools and districts are implementing more targeted approaches to raising graduation rates, including "early warning and intervention systems" to identify and assist students who are experiencing educational disengagement and academic failure that can lead to dropping out later on. Check & Connect, a program developed in the late 1990s by a group of University of Minnesota researchers and local educators with support from the U.S. Department of Education, has demonstrated promising results in several studies. Check & Connect relies on frequent, systematic monitoring of student warning signs—such as absenteeism or disciplinary problems—and timely interventions to produce gains in attendance, educational engagement, and ultimately graduation.[19]

Other schools are using "adolescent literacy and numeracy curricula" aimed at getting middle and high school students caught up academically. The goal is not to provide traditional "remedial education" but to *accelerate* instruction so that students can transition into a rigorous college-prep curriculum as soon as the second semester of their freshmen year in high school.

Still other schools are creating better institutional, schoolwide supports. Maryland high schools that have reorganized ninth grade into more supportive small learning communities with team teaching—among other reforms—have had success improving graduation rates.[20]

An evaluation of the Talent Development program released last year showed that even the most challenged, high-poverty urban high schools can improve ninth-grade promotion and on-time graduation rates. In Philadelphia, a group of neighborhood high schools replicating the Talent Development model have seen substantial improvements for several successive waves of ninth graders. "In a high school of 500 first-time ninth-graders, Talent Development adds about nine days of school attendance for each student and helps an extra 125 students pass algebra, an extra 40 students achieve promotion to the tenth grade, and an extra 40 students graduate on time," the evaluation concluded.[21]

The Talent Development model illustrates the power of combining intensive, individual supports with institutional reforms. The design reshapes ninth grade into small, highly supportive learning communities called "Success Academies," in which students take intensive "double dose" periods of accelerated mathematics and literacy courses during the first semester in order to handle a rigorous, college-prep curriculum starting the second semester. The recent evaluation noted: "Talent Development's strong positive impacts […] are consistent with the model's […] emphasis on combining high-quality curricular and instructional enhancements with pervasive structural reforms aimed at building supportive and personalized learning environments."[22]

But the Talent Development evaluation also might illustrate that high schools alone will probably not be able to solve the dropout problem in high-poverty districts. Many students still fall off track even in schools that institute pervasive reforms and intensive student supports. That doesn't mean the dropout problem cannot be solved in urban districts. Rather, it means that middle and elementary schools *also* must be brought on board as part of a more comprehensive solution.

One way is to track students through the entire education pipeline, reporting back to middle and elementary school educators how their graduates fare in high school—how many stay on track during freshmen year and how many eventually graduate. The Consortium on Chicago School Research has prepared such information for all feeder schools in the city, with outcome data broken out by student background factors and by how well students were achieving when they left eighth grade. A sample can be found at http://www.consortium-chicago.org/publications/2170/net2170.html. Such reports can help elementary and middle school educators begin to take collective responsibility for the dropout problem even though accountability systems only hold high schools accountable for graduation rate results.

One thing is certain: District officials and others who work with schools should waste no time in engaging educators *at all levels* in a serious conversation about the dropout problem. Greater accountability is on the way, and educators will have difficulty taking effective action until they can free themselves from the constraints of conventional wisdom.

Teachers need to believe that the vast majority of students want to graduate and see the value of earning a high school diploma. And they need to understand how schools themselves can make it much easier—or much harder—for teenagers to do so. Next to all those posters and banners that proclaim "All students can learn," they will need to start taping up others that state "… *and* all students can graduate!"

Endnotes

[1] Swanson, C. B. (2004, February). *Who graduates and who doesn't? A statistical portrait of high school graduation, class of 2001.* Washington, DC: Urban Institute Education Policy Center. Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410934_WhoGraduates.pdf. See also Greene, J. P., & Winters, M. A. (2005, February). *Public high school graduation and college-readiness rates: 1991–2002* (Education Working Paper No. 8). New York: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_08.htm

[2] Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., & Nagaoka, J. (2004). *How do we get large urban high schools to care about dropout rates and will No Child Left Behind help or hurt?* Paper prepared for the Developmental, Economic and Policy Perspectives on the Federal No Child Left Behind Act conference, Center for Human Potential and Public Policy, Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago, Chicago. In the authors' words (p. 7), "The first conception is that the propensity to drop out is a student characteristic, not an outcome of the school. And the second conception is that paying attention to reducing dropout rates directly conflicts with efforts to raise achievement."

5

The Center
FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL
REFORM AND IMPROVEMENT

[3] Snyder, S. (2003, August 6). Boredom cited as a reason for thoughts of dropping out. *Philadelphia Inquirer,* p. B1.

[4] Balfanz, R., & Herzog, L. (2005, March). *Keeping middle grades students on track to graduation: Initial analysis and implications.* Presentation given at the second Regional Middle Grades Symposium, Philadelphia, PA. Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://www.philaedfund.org/powerpoint/dropoutresearch_4.06.ppt

[5] Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q. (2005). *The on-track indicator as a predictor of high school graduation.* Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://www.consortium-chicago.org/publications/p78.html

[6] Jordon, W. J., McPartland, J. M., & Lara, J. (1999). Rethinking the causes of high school dropout. *The Prevention Researcher, 6*(3), 1–4.

[7] Markow, D., & Scheer, M. (2002) *Survey of the American teacher 2002, student life: School, home, and community.* New York: MetLife. Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://www.metlife.com/WPSAssets/11738669411033654558V1FBook%20v.3.pdf

[8] Ingels, S. J., Planty, M., & Bozick, R. (2005). *A profile of the American high school senior in 2004: A first look—Initial results from the first follow-up of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002* (ELS:2002) (NCES 2006–348). Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006348.pdf

[9] Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J., Morison, K. B. (2006, March). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts.* Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises (p. iv). Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf

[10] Berktold, J., Geis, S., & Kaufman, P. (1998, June). *Subsequent educational attainment of high school dropouts.* Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=98085

[11] Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., & Nagaoka, J. (2004). *How do we get large urban high schools to care about dropout rates and will No Child Left Behind help or hurt?* Paper prepared for the Developmental, Economic and Policy Perspectives on the Federal No Child Left Behind Act conference, Center for Human Potential and Public Policy, Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago, Chicago (p. 9).

[12] Allensworth, E., & Easton, J. Q. (2005). *The on-track indicator as a predictor of high school graduation.* Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://www.consortium-chicago.org/publications/p78.html

[13] Roderick, M., & Camburn, E. (1999, Summer). Risk and recovery from course failure in the early years of high school. *American Educational Research Journal, 36*(2), 303–343.

[14] Croninger, R. G., & Lee, V. E. (2001). Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. *Teachers College Record, 103*(4), 548–581. See also Lee, V. E., & Burkham, D. T. (2003). Dropping out of high school: The role of school organization and structure. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(2), 353–393.

[15] Croninger, R. G., & Lee, V. E. (2001). Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. *Teachers College Record, 103*(4), 548–581. See also Lee, V. E., & Burkham, D. T. (2003). Dropping out of high school: The role of school organization and structure. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(2), 353–393.

[16] Lee, V. E. & Burkham, D. T. (2003). Dropping out of high school: The role of school organization and structure. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(2), 353–393.

[17] Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J., Morison, K. B. (2006, March). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts.* Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises (p. iv). Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf

[18] Cavanagh, S. (2006, March 15). Career academics. *Education Week, 25*(27), 30–32.

[19] Lehr, C. A., Sinclair, M. F., & Christenson, S. L. (2004). Addressing student engagement and truancy prevention during the elementary school years: A replication study of the Check & Connect model. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 9*(3), 279–301.

[20] Kerr, K. A., & Legters, N. E. (2004). Preventing dropout; Use and impact of organizational reforms designed to ease the transition to high school. In Orfield, G. (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 221–242). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

[21] Kemple, J. J., Herlihy, C. M., & Smith, T. J. (2005, May). *Making progress toward graduation: Evidence from the Talent Development High School model.* New York: MDRC (page ES-8). Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://www.mdrc.org/publications/408/full.pdf

[22] Kemple, J. J., Herlihy, C. M., & Smith, T. J. (2005, May). *Making progress toward graduation: Evidence from the Talent Development High School model.* New York: MDRC (page iii). Retrieved May 25, 2006, from http://www.mdrc.org/publications/408/full.pdf

LEARNING POINT
Associates™