

## Drop-out Prevention and Reentry for High Risk Students

Reducing the number of high school dropouts and increasing graduation rates are national policy priorities. Attaining a high school diploma is the minimum requirement for securing a job, and dropping out leads to economic hardship and social problems. Better educated individuals earn more, are less likely to be involved in crime or be on welfare (Belfield & Levin, 2007). Yet, across the United States, a high percentage of students—mostly low-income and minority—fail to graduate from high school (Education Week, 2008). Nationally, about two-thirds of all students, and only about half of all African American, Latinos, and Native Americans who enter ninth grade graduate four years later.

Both nationally, and in the Mid-Atlantic region, members of racial/ethnic minorities are less likely to graduate than their White or Asian peers. There are also significant gender gaps, with female students in all racial categories graduating from high school at a higher rate than male students. Nationally, in 2001 graduation rates were 72.0% for females compared to 64.1% for males (Swanson, 2004). Graduation rates for minority male students were the lowest, with only 42.8% of black and 48.0% of Latino male students graduating in 2001 (Swanson, 2004).

There are a number of factors related to the likelihood of dropping out. Low graduation rates are strongly associated with poverty, segregation, and schools with more students enrolled in special education. Students attending schools in central cities and larger districts are less likely than students in non-urban and smaller schools systems to graduate (Swanson, 2004). The district poverty level has the strongest independent effect on graduation rates, particularly for African American students—African American graduation rates in very low-poverty districts were around 70% compared to about 50% in high-poverty districts (Swanson, 2004).

Research suggests that the decision to stay in or to leave school is affected by multiple contextual and policy factors that interact over the lifetime of a student. To understand why students drop out, Russell Rumberger developed a conceptual framework based on an individual perspective and an institutional perspective (2004). This framework suggests reciprocal relationships among these two factors and the possibility that these relationships can change over time as students' progress through school.

The framework's individual perspective focuses on student attributes—student background characteristics, student engagement in schooling, and educational performance. There is a strong relationship between student background characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender, poverty, special education placement, and

language) and dropping out of school. Equally important is what students experience once in school. Students who are engaged in learning and in the social dimensions of school are less likely to leave school. For example, students may leave schools because courses are not challenging or because they have poor relationships with their peers and teachers (Rumberger, 2004). Poor academic achievement, both in high school and in earlier grades, is a strong predictor of dropping out. High absenteeism, student discipline problems, and student mobility are also associated with dropping out (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Rumberger, 2004; Rumberger & Arellano, 2008).

The individual perspective also factors in the importance of earlier preparation. A student's success in the first year of high school is highly correlated to his or her potential for graduation. Students who do not successfully maintain an adequate freshman course load, either because of attendance or academic achievement, are less likely to graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2005, 2007; Cahill, Hamilton, & Lynch, 2006; NCES, 2007). While success in the first year of high school is important for staying on-track to graduate, research suggests that failing in the early grades predicts failing in high school. A study of the California high school exit exam found that it was possible to identify students in elementary school who are at risk of failing (Zau & Betts, 2008). This research suggests a highly individual approach is needed to identify and remedy dropping out of school.

The institutional perspective focuses on school characteristics, policies and practices. Structural features of schools, such as their size, the resources available to the school, and access to high-quality teachers influence dropout rates. School discipline policies that expel or discharge problematic students from school, and rules governing low grades, poor attendance, and being overage in grade can lead to suspensions, expulsions, or forced transfers, and ultimately impact dropout rates (Rumberger, 2004). The growth of zero tolerance policies, which automatically discharge students for violating school safety rules is another example (Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

Identifying students at risk of dropping out is the first step to addressing the problem. Since dropping out is a process, taking place over a long period of time involving multiple factors, there are multiple intervention points, various programs that may be effective, and a need for multiple strategies to ensure success (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007).

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