Facing the School Dropout Dilemma

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to an education that develops their “personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.” Every year, an estimated 1.3 million American high school students drop out; a disproportionate number of whom are youth of color.

The nation’s children are its future workers, citizens, and leaders. Education remains the major tool by which people become empowered and the economic, social, and personal well-being of all citizens in a pluralistic society increases. A high dropout rate diminishes the pool of qualified people from diverse backgrounds who will enter the professional and political ranks that make important public policy decisions. Every school’s mission should be the education of students to become “knowledgeable, responsible, socially skilled, healthy, caring, and contributing citizens.”

The fact that so many students never complete high school has a deep and wide-ranging impact on the U.S.’s long-term economic outlook. The stakes have only increased for those who drop out over time; the median earnings of families headed by a high school dropout declined by a third between 1974 and 2004. At current rates, a significant segment of the population will remain entrenched in poverty while on a global scale the competitiveness of the American labor force will continue to lag behind.

APA has a longstanding commitment to school dropout prevention as is evident from its 1996 resolution on the topic. This article seeks to complement and supplement the resolution with data from more recent research on child development, early childhood education, and social and emotional learning that helps to define the school dropout dilemma.

Who is dropping out?

In 2008, the national dropout rate was estimated at 8% of individuals ages 16 to 24 either not enrolled in school or without their diplomas/GEDs. Broken down by race, the estimated dropout rates were 4.8% for Whites, 9.9% for African Americans, and 18.3% for Latinos while in 2006, the dropout rate for American Indian/Alaska Native youth (ages 16-24) was estimated at 15%.

There are also gender differences in dropout rates. Overall, males are estimated to drop out at higher rates than females (8.5% to 7.5%) with particularly pronounced differences for Latinos (19.9% of males compared to 16.7% of females). However, African American males drop out at a slightly lower rate than females (8.7% compared to 11.1%).

Poverty has the strongest correlation with high dropout rates; in 2007, NCES estimated that dropout rates for students living in lowest quartile of family income were more than 7 times higher than those of students in the highest family income quartile (i.e., 16.4% vs. 2.2%).

The dropout rates of various schools are highly dependent on the surrounding poverty of their locations. For instance, 80% of “dropout factories”, i.e., high schools that routinely have senior classes with 60% fewer students than their entering freshmen classes, can be found in just 15 states primarily in the North, West, and South of the U.S. These schools are only 12% of the national total yet they are estimated to produce about half of the nation’s dropouts overall.
• The overriding common characteristic for these schools is location in poverty-stricken areas with high rates of unemployment, crime, and ill health. In addition, their student bodies are comprised disproportionately of children of color.⁷
• These “dropout factories” are estimated to produce 81% of Native American, 73% of African American, 66% of Latino, and 34% of White dropouts respectively.⁸
• Ethnic minority students who are fortunate enough to attend middle class or affluent high schools are promoted to the 12th grade at similar rates as their White peers.⁹
• However, nearly half of the nation’s African American and Latino students attend high schools in low-income areas with dropout rates that hover in the 40-50% range.⁹,¹⁰

There is no single prominent risk factor predicting dropout. Rather, there are numerous risk factors that in combination with each other raise the probability of youth leaving high school early.¹¹ These factors fall into four broad categories related to individuals (e.g., truancy, poor school attitude), families (e.g., low-income, lack of parental involvement), schools (e.g., negative school climate, low expectations), and communities (e.g., high crime, lack of community support for schools).¹² Dropout rates particularly correlate with high poverty rates, poor school attendance, poor academic performance, grade retention (i.e., being held back), and disengagement from school.¹³ Fortunately, there is a growing and encouraging body of research for schools on how to prevent dropout by addressing problem behaviors, promoting academic success, and enhancing overall health and wellbeing for students.

**The importance of early education and early literacy**

Research is discovering that dropouts arise from an accumulation of various risk factors throughout children’s schooling that peak once in high school. It is increasingly evident that school dropout prevention must begin as early as possible. Some researchers have identified early predictors of dropout in children before they are enrolled in kindergarten.¹³

• Early childhood lays the foundation upon which to build future academic success. It provides a critical window for optimal brain development; 90% of brain development is estimated to occur before age 5.¹⁴
• However, it is also a period when children are most vulnerable to environmental risk factors such as poverty, malnutrition, trauma/abuse, or maternal depression.¹⁵
• Recipients of high quality early childhood education (i.e., consisting of a holistic, nurturing, consistent, and stimulating curriculum) exhibit lower rates of grade retention, higher levels of academic achievement, fewer special education services, and a stronger commitment to graduate from high school.¹⁶
• Early literacy development is also vital to later academic success. Children with poor reading skills are more likely to repeat a grade setting the stage for a pattern of failure in school. The fundamentals for being a good reader (i.e., cognitive and language skills) are learned before children reach school age.¹⁷
• Interventions targeted at children during the birth-to-three, preschool, and kindergarten stages can prepare them to enter elementary school with good language development, cognitive skills, and self concept regardless of their family backgrounds or personal characteristics.¹⁸

Critical milestones in schooling

As children progress through school, their failure to meet certain milestones is highly predictive of later dropout. Parents and educators should be particularly vigilant regarding each child’s academic performance. Recognizing the warning signs promptly is crucial to early and effective intervention.

- By the 3rd grade, it is very important for children to have mastered how to read since it underpins future learning in the upper elementary grades where more complex reading skills are required. They should have transitioned from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”.

- As children progress through the sixth and eighth grades, poor academic performance in math and English, low reading scores, absenteeism, and disengagement from school become very reliable predictors of whether they will later drop out of high school.

- On the individual level, it is also important to consider children’s beliefs in their own competence and motivation to succeed academically. Research seems to indicate that children’s beliefs in their abilities tend to become increasingly negative as they grow older, at least through early adolescence. When children believe they are less competent in certain academic activities, they tend to value them less which has negative implications for the effort they will put into school work.

- Student effort (i.e., the level of school attachment, involvement, and commitment) is highly correlated with more positive academic outcomes.

- Peer associations also have an important effect on academic outcomes. Peer relationships can create a set of norms and values that either promote or undermine academic achievement. Meaningful (or positive) relationships with peers that promote psychological and life skills may promote academic achievement and motivation, however, negative peer pressure or social disapproval toward school work might lead some students to drop out of school.

- The transition into ninth grade can also be particularly difficult for many youth. At this stage, many students move from middle schools into high schools where they are likely to feel lost and where academic rigor increases substantially.

- Many students are held back in the ninth grade and subsequently do not get promoted to or drop out in the tenth grade creating the “ninth grade bulge” and “tenth grade dip” in school enrollments. The ninth grade attrition rate is exacerbated by poverty; 40% of dropouts in low income schools leave after ninth grade compared to 27% of dropouts in low poverty districts.

- Poor grades, poor attendance, and disengagement from school become particularly threatening to the completion of high school at this stage and four major high school dropout categories begin to emerge:
  - **Life events** – dropout is prompted by something that happens to the student outside of school, e.g., teen pregnancy, foster care placement, high school mobility.
  - **Fade outs** – dropout is prompted by frustration and boredom with school even though the student has not repeated or failed any grades.
  - **Push outs** – dropouts are subtly or explicitly encouraged to withdraw or transfer away from school because they are perceived to be difficult or detrimental to the success of the school.
  - **Failure to succeed** – dropouts leave school after a history of academic failure, absenteeism, or lack of engagement.

- In addition to improving the quality of the school environment, students benefit from prevention programs that enhance their social and emotional assets (e.g., managing emotions and interpersonal situations effectively, establishing positive goals, enhancing feelings of competence).

- School programs that focus on social, emotional, and academic learning from kindergarten through high school have been found to improve school attitudes, behavior, and academic performance.
The approaches that have produced positive outcomes include:
- Partnership between schools and families to encourage learning
- Safe and orderly school and classroom environments
- Caring relationships between students and teachers
- Cooperative learning and proactive classroom management
- High academic expectations of youth from both adults and peers.

The interaction of race/ethnicity and poverty with school dropout rates

It is evident from the statistics above that a disproportionate number of ethnic minority students drop out of high school. These disparities are particularly pronounced for African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Latino youth.5,6

- The predictors of dropout (i.e., delayed reading skills, grade retention, absenteeism, and school disengagement) are significantly higher for students of color, which can be linked primarily to higher rates of poverty, less access to high quality early childhood education, and higher representation in “dropout factories”.
- For Latino youth in particular, a significant number are recent immigrants who are English-language learners, i.e., not fully fluent in English and speak another language at home, which exacerbates their risk of dropping out or not completing high school on time.27
- Recent encouraging research has found that young Latino children in low-income areas show strong social skills in the classroom due to good parenting practices that facilitate learning in elementary school. However, these gains are undermined by mediocre schools as they grow older.28
- Several risk factors affect children born at the intersection of race and poverty throughout their development predicting school failure or dropout and entry into the juvenile justice system. Children of color struggling academically or acting out are often met with police intervention, suspensions, or expulsions instead of appropriate academic intervention in schools of poor quality.29
- African American students in particular are disciplined or suspended at disproportionate rates for reasons that include lack of teacher training (in classroom management or culturally competent practices) and racial stereotypes only contributing further to disengagement and later dropout from school.
- Risk of falling into the school to prison pipeline is particularly pronounced for boys of color with approximately 1 in 3 African American boys and 1 in 6 Latino boys projected to become incarcerated at least once in their lifetimes.29
- Given the right opportunities and necessary investment, students of color living in poverty can achieve success in school and avoid the dropout trap. Schools that have employed interventions that maximize:
  - intensive instruction (longer school hours and Saturday school),
  - monitoring and encouragement of attendance,
  - student mentoring,
  - after-school and extra-curricular programs,
  - high expectations of students from adults and peers,
  - engagement and involvement of parents, families, and communities

have demonstrated positive results in academic achievement and dropout prevention for students of color.30, 31, 32, 33
- For dropout prevention to be successful for low-income minority students in many of our nation’s schools, attention must be paid to social and emotional factors that support academic achievement
i.e., academic and school attachment, teacher support, peer values and overall mental health and wellbeing.  

The interaction of sexual orientation with school dropout rates

Precise statistics on dropout rates among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students (LGBT) are difficult to find, although some have estimated that almost a third of LGBT students drop out of high school, more than triple the national rate.  

- The main cause of dropout among LGBT high school students appears to be the hostile school climate created by continual bullying and harassment from peers due to their sexual orientation. Recent survey data has found that nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT students (86.2%) experienced harassment at school in the past year, three-fifths (60.8%) felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and about a third (32.7%) skipped a day of school in the past month due to feeling unsafe.  
- Other national survey data found that LGBT students fared worse on many measures of academic achievement and school engagement than their peers (i.e., having a lower GPA, higher likelihood of failing a class, and less positive feelings towards teachers or school in general).  
- LGBT students stand to benefit from school policies that counteract bullying and harassment, support the coming out process, and reaffirm the dignity and rights of all students.

The interaction of disabilities with school dropout rates

Students with disabilities drop out of school at disproportionately higher rates than their peers. Most recent available data found over 30% of students with disabilities were estimated to have dropped out.  

- The majority of students with disabilities who do not complete high school tend to have emotional/behavioral disabilities (52.3%), speech or language impairments (29.4%), and learning disabilities (29.1%).  
- Although there are fewer data available, students with disabilities, especially those with emotional and behavioral disorders, appear to be suspended and expelled at rates disproportionate to their representation in the population.  
- In addition, arrest rates are relatively high for students with disabilities who drop out. Approximately one-third of students with disabilities who drop out of high school have spent a night in jail; triple the rate of students with disabilities who have completed high school.  
- One dropout prevention program that has been successful with students with disabilities uses consistent monitoring of students at risk of dropout (e.g., course failures, tardiness, missed classes, absenteeism, detention and suspension) and then connecting with them through academic support, in-depth problem solving, and coordination with community services.

How do high dropout rates affect the U.S. economy?

The societal and economic costs of a high dropout rate for the U.S. are gigantic. It is estimated that approximately 12 million students will dropout over the next decade or so costing the U.S. about $3 trillion. Dropout rates are far more likely to experience reduced job and income opportunities, chronic unemployment, incarceration, or require government assistance than the rest of the population.

- In 2008, dropouts earned substantially less per week than those with high school diplomas (27% less) and bachelor’s (55% less), master’s (63% less), and doctoral (71% less) degrees.
• High school dropouts are bearing the brunt of the ongoing recession more than the rest of the population. While unemployment rates are abnormally high overall, as of April 2010, unemployment rates for those without a diploma were 14.7% compared with high school (10.6%) and college graduates (4.7%).

• The risk of incarceration (jails, prisons, juvenile detention centers) for male dropouts is significant. In 2007, male dropouts aged 16-24 were 6.3 times more likely to be institutionalized than high school graduates and when compared with those with a bachelor degree or higher, their risk skyrocketed to 63 times more likely.

• On a global scale, the U.S. is underperforming its competitors. The U.S. ranks 8th from the bottom in a comparison of high school graduation rates among the 30 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

• It has been estimated that if dropouts from the Class of 2009 had graduated, the nation’s economy would benefit from nearly $335 billion in additional income over the course of their lifetimes.¹

• Just halving the Class of 2008 dropout rate in the nation’s largest cities has been estimated to bring several billion additional dollars in economic benefits including increased earnings, home and auto sales, jobs, tax revenue, spending and investment, and long term economic growth.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Dropping out of high school severely limits the chances of future success for far too many children. It deepens and continues the cycle of poverty into future generations. Receiving a good education is the lifeline by which many youth can lift themselves out of poverty. Facing the high school dropout dilemma will require commitment and investment in high quality early childhood education, attention to social and emotional learning, continual monitoring of student attendance and academic progress, intensive instruction for those falling behind, using alternatives to school push-out, fostering of a positive school climate, and engagement with parents, families, and communities. America’s future depends on the delivery of a high quality education to all children regardless of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or disability so they may develop to their fullest potential.

Dropout Prevention Resources

APA Center for Psychology in Schools and Education
Alliance for Excellent Education
America’s Promise Alliance
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
Children’s Defense Fund
National Center for Education Statistics
National Dropout Prevention Center/Network
National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities
What Works Clearinghouse (Institute for Education Sciences)
References:


