

Issue Brief: Dropouts

One of the biggest issues in education today is high school completion. The key questions are how many students drop out, why they drop out and what can be done to make sure all students earn a diploma or equivalent certificate. Research has linked dropping out to many negative outcomes, including lower lifetime earnings, lower life expectancy, a higher dependence on social services and a greater propensity to commit crime.

Measuring Dropouts

In recent years, questions have been raised about the methods by which states, schools and districts use to report dropout and graduation rates. A wide range of formulas to measure how many students graduate in four years makes comparisons difficult. One method is the “cohort” formula, which compares the number of students entering ninth grade with the number graduating four years later. With this method, there is a danger of mislabeling students as dropouts if they do not complete their high school education within four years. Another common method, the “event” dropout rate, counts the share of students in 9th through 12th grade who actually drop out in a given year.

Jay Greene, of the Manhattan Institute, and Robert Balfanz, of Johns Hopkins University, are among the researchers who have questioned states’ reported graduation rates. Their formulas resulted in much lower rates than states had reported. But Balfanz’s formula didn’t account for special education students, students who take longer than four years to graduate or transfers. In April 2008, then-education secretary Margaret Spellings announced a move by the federal government to ensure that all states use the same formula to calculate graduation and dropout rates.

The U.S. Department of Education is allowing states to apply for waivers to use extended, or fifth-year, graduation rates in addition to four-year rates to comply with No Child Left Behind reporting requirements. Only one state, Washington, currently has permission to use them, but more states may receive the waiver in the coming year.

Reporting tips:

- Find out who the state, district and schools consider a dropout. Get a clear definition. There should be a definition in state attendance laws and in district policies.
- Find out how your state and districts calculate dropout and graduation rates. Methods should be described in state and local laws and policies. Be aware that your state may publish more than one graduation rate, using one that focuses on the four-year graduation rate and another that includes fifth-year graduates and students who earn alternate diplomas (such as special education diplomas).

Find out what other completion data your state publishes. States, districts and schools should also have information on students earning certificates of completion, special or modified diplomas and GEDs.

- Find out who does the calculations: the state or the districts? Whom do the formulas include and leave out?

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Subpopulations

Certain student subpopulations can skew dropout rates. These include overage students, homeless students, immigrants, special education students, migrant students, those returning from the justice system, those reentering school after dropping out and students who fail core classes.

Reporting tips:

- Schools with high levels of student turnover, especially those near military installations or in agricultural areas, bear scrutiny, as do districts with high numbers of homeless students.
- If your data don't include unique state ID numbers for students, migrant students could be counted as dropouts multiple times.
- A student who leaves high school but earns a GED may be considered a dropout in some formulas and a completer in others.
- Are your schools and districts reporting estimated dropout rates, or working with actual population figures?

Interventions

Risk factors for dropouts include attendance rates and policies, eighth-grade and freshman failure rates and the transition from middle to high school. In surveys, students say they dropped out because of a lack of credits, the size of their schools and classes, home factors and a lack of connections with their school and faculty. Several districts have accelerated programs designed to bring dropouts back into the system and help them earn credits toward diplomas. Be alert for faculty and staff who may be funneling to alternative programs students who could graduate with support and remediation.

Reporting Tips:

- Look into how the district, and the state, track students as they move through school systems. What are districts doing to keep students in

school? What are districts doing to retrieve dropouts?

- Look closely at alternative education options for at-risk students. How are they structured? Who teaches them? What curricula do they use? What interventions do they offer? How do they measure and track success?
- Look into whether the courses are rigorous and what types of colleges and businesses admit or hire these students.

Sources

The best sources are the dropouts, or former dropouts, themselves. Most high school students, directors of alternative education programs and community colleges know dropouts. Find out why students drop out, and for those who have reentered education, what brought them back.

Other sources:

Robert Balfanz, Johns Hopkins University, (410) 516-8800; rbalfanz@csos.jhu.edu.

Jay Greene, The Manhattan Institute, (954) 680-8083; jgreen@manhattan-institute.org.

Alan Davis, University of Colorado-Denver; alan.davis@cudenver.edu.

Christopher Swanson, Editorial Projects in Education Research Center; cswanson@epe.org.

Useful Web sites:

Alliance for Excellent Education
(www.all4ed.org)

National Dropout Prevention Center Network
(www.dropoutprevention.org)

National High School Center
(www.betterhighschools.org)

www.silentepidemic.org