

Understanding and Addressing the Issue of the High School Dropout Age

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Executive Summary

In February 2003, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) conducted a policy analysis on high school dropout age, providing an overview of the opportunities and challenges that might arise from increasing the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18. This paper begins with background information on the issue of high school dropouts, followed by a discussion of definitions of *dropout* and how rates of high school dropouts are calculated in most states. Also included are examples of how some states have successfully raised the compulsory attendance age. The paper concludes with research-based solutions for preventing increasing rates of high school dropouts.

Statistics on the economic disparity between those who have completed high school and those who have dropped out, and the related social implications of this disparity, are troubling. With the increase of technology in the workplace, the demand for a highly skilled labor force requires at minimum a high school degree. High school dropouts earn lower incomes and face higher unemployment than students who complete high school. Research indicates that dropouts are more likely to have health problems, engage in criminal activities, and become dependent on welfare and other government-related programs than high school graduates (Rumberger, 1987).

The National Center for Education Statistics, the primary federal resource for U.S. dropout data, reports that national dropout rates have changed slightly from 1990 to 2000 with rates fluctuating between 10.9 and 12.5 percent respectively (U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 2002). States are becoming aware of the increased importance of completing a high school degree for entry into postsecondary education or the labor market. Changing the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18 is one strategy states are employing in an attempt to reduce dropout rates. Increasing the compulsory attendance age is a policy that is garnering support across the country, and in 2002 six states made the push to amend their laws.

In addition to changing the compulsory attendance age, decreasing the dropout rate requires the active participation of schools, districts, local communities, parents, and state government working in conjunction with one another. Research has also indicated that to decrease the dropout rate, active partnership between the business, economic, and social sectors of the community is necessary to bring about change (Woods, 1995). A comprehensive approach to dropout prevention also focuses on keeping students in school and ensures that time spent in the classroom is engaging and useful. Restructuring strategies that challenge traditional models of school organization to make schools more interesting and responsive places where students learn more and achieve higher standards are essential.

An important aspect of increasing the compulsory attendance age is to provide alternative means of educating students who are continually truant, misbehaved, or pose a threat to themselves or their classmates. Alternative schools are generally better equipped to provide quality education to at-risk students and can often bring dropout-prone students to graduation. Also, establishing a tracking system that identifies students with poor

grades, truant habits, disciplinary records, and severe absenteeism could be useful in recognizing at-risk students so additional resources can be provided (Rumberger, 2001).

There is no single reason that can account for why students drop out of school, but research suggests that a combination of factors acting together contributes to the problem. In attempting to decrease the dropout rate, in addition to raising the compulsory attendance age, emphasis should focus on meeting the needs of all students, employing such measures as alternative programs, supervised work experience, and additional counseling.

Increasing the compulsory attendance age can be an important component in a comprehensive effort to limit the number of students that drop out of school each year. Family backgrounds combined with student experiences provide insight into why students drop out of school. School districts, communities, and parents all play an important role in preventing students from dropping out. Understanding the dropout crisis is not a simple task, and improvement requires reforms at all levels.

Introduction

Most students who drop out of high school have limited job choices and tenuous economic futures. Recent studies suggest that even receiving a General Educational Development (GED) certificate does not provide workers in today's job market with financial rewards equal to those with a regular high school diploma (Viadero, 2001). In fact, the employment market does not value job applicants with a GED or a high school equivalency certificate much more than applicants who have dropped out (Bonsteel, 2001). Debra Viadero reports that without a high school diploma, young adults' prospects in the labor market are restricted. Between 1979 and 1996, the real earnings of a 25- to 34-year-old male dropout fell by 28 percent while earnings for female dropouts declined 7 percent (Viadero, 2001). For these as well as other reasons, lowering the dropout rate has long been a goal of educators and legislators (U.S. GAO, 2002).

In February 2003, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) conducted a policy analysis on high school dropout age, providing an overview of the opportunities and challenges that might arise from increasing the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18. This paper begins with background information on the issue of high school dropouts, followed by a discussion of definitions of *dropout* and how rates of high school dropouts are calculated in most states. Also included are examples of how some states have successfully raised the compulsory attendance age. The paper concludes with research-based solutions for preventing increasing rates of high school dropouts.

Background Information

Statistics on the economic disparity between those who have completed high school and those who have dropped out, and the related social implications of this disparity, are troubling. In 2000, an estimated 11 percent of 16- through 24-year-olds who were not enrolled in a high school program had neither a high school diploma nor an equivalent credential (U.S. GAO, 2002). In 1993, more than 12 million people 18 years or older possessed less than a ninth-grade education (National Dropout Prevention Network, 2000). High school graduates earn an average of \$6,415 more per year than those who drop out. In 1998, 28.2 percent of youths in the labor force who had dropped out of school in the previous 12 months were unemployed. In comparison, the unemployment rate of 1998 high school graduates who were not enrolled in college was much lower at 18.4 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999). A National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study found that in 1994, high school dropouts were more than twice as likely to receive public assistance as high school graduates who did not go on to college—14 percent compared to 6 percent (Smith et al., 1996). High school dropouts also comprise a disproportionate share of the nation's prisons and death row inmates (U.S. GAO, 2002). Eighty percent of prisoners in America are high school dropouts, according to the National Dropout Prevention Network (2000) study of *Dropout Statistics*.

Dropouts also drain the economy of much needed revenue. In fact, each year's class of dropouts will cost the country over \$200 billion dollars during their lifetimes in lost

earnings and unrealized tax revenue (Catterall, 1985). For example, in Texas, between the 1985–86 and 2001–02 school years, the estimated cumulative costs of public school dropouts were in excess of \$488 billion in forgone income, lost tax revenue, increased job training, welfare, unemployment, and payments to the criminal justice system (Johnson, 2001). Dropouts account for almost half of the heads of households on welfare (Schwartz, 1995).

“The loss of taxes, loss of production and the cost of assistance provided to dropouts make the problem of high school non-completion an issue for every taxpayer” (Hale, 1998). Students classified as at-risk candidates for dropping out of high school frequently have no form of health insurance. Research has indicated that dropouts are more likely to have health problems, engage in criminal activities, and become dependent on welfare and other government-related programs than high school graduates (Rumberger, 1987).

NCES, the primary federal resource for U.S. dropout data, reports that national dropout rates varied slightly between 1990 and 2000. Within this 10-year span, the number of students who had not received a high school diploma or an equivalency certificate fluctuated between 10.9 and 12.5 percent nationally (U.S. GAO, 2002).

High School Graduation Rates for Midwestern States: 1999–2000

State	National Rank	Percent of Ninth Graders Who Graduated in Four Years
Minnesota	5	83.7%
Iowa	6	83.0%
Wisconsin	9	76.9%
Illinois	25	71.1%
Ohio	28	69.6%
Indiana	32	68.1%
Michigan	35	64.8%

(Kaufmann, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000)

Dropout rates varied considerably by race over this period: whites, 8 percent; blacks, 13 percent; and Hispanics 29 percent (Kaufmann, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). This disparity reported by NCES is alarming, but establishing the exact degree of difference in dropout rates among minority groups is difficult because methods and classifications vary considerably among states and regions of the country.

Nevertheless, one of the most challenging issues facing the educational community is the existence of gaps and differences in dropout rates between ethnic and minority groups. Child poverty rates for blacks and Hispanics are more than twice as high as poverty rates for whites (Kaufmann et al., 2000). Dr. Susan Mayer (1991), in her research study that analyzed the differences in dropout rates between whites and minority students, concluded that dropout rates would be reduced if racial minority groups attended schools where racial and socioeconomic compositions were similar. “Indeed, the family, school,

and community condition for racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. are generally much worse than for the white majority” (Rumberger, 2001, pp. 18-19).

Graduation rates vary among ethnic groups and by socioeconomic status. The high school graduation rate for black students in 1999 was 72.9 percent, which is 3.9 points below the national average of 76.8 percent. Graduation rates for white students and for Hispanics were 82 percent and 54.9 percent, respectively (Bonsteel, 2001). For the year 2000, NCES reported the dropout rate for Asian/Pacific Islander students was lower than it was for students from all other racial and ethnic backgrounds. The rate for Asian/Pacific Islanders was 3.8 percent, compared with 27.8 percent for Hispanics, 13.1 percent for blacks, and 6.9 percent for whites (Kaufmann et al., 2001).

The dropout rate for white students in 2000 remained lower than the rate for black students, but since 1970 the difference in rates for whites and blacks has narrowed (Kaufmann et al., 2001). It is important to note that the narrowing of this gap occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. Since 1990, the gap has remained fairly constant (Kaufmann et al., 2001). According to the National Dropout Prevention Network (2000), black students are still twice as likely to drop out of school as white students.

Hispanics make up a disproportionate share of the country’s student dropouts. Hispanic students have significantly higher dropout rates: 30 percent of Hispanic young adults are classified as dropouts, compared to 8.6 percent for non-Hispanic whites, and 12.1 percent for non-Hispanic blacks. The dropout rate for Hispanics born outside the United States is much higher than for Hispanics born in the United States in 2000 (44.2 percent versus 15.2 percent). Hispanics represented nearly 16 percent of all 16- to 19-year-olds in 2000, regardless of educational background, which is up from 11 percent in 1990 (Associated Press, 2002).

Defining *Dropout* and Calculating Rates

Dropout figures also vary depending upon which dropout or school completion measure is used. The variance occurs because local, state, and federal calculations often use different age groups, data, and definitions in classifying dropouts (U.S. GAO, 2002). Since 1992, states have been reporting dropout information to NCES at the school district level. NCES has disaggregated dropout rates into three categories: “event,” “status,” and “cohort.” Each category provides different information on dropout populations. There are several ways to calculate the dropout rate, but there is no ideal measurement for all situations.

The event dropout rate is the proportion of students in a given age range who leave school each year without completing a high school program. The event dropout rate measures dropouts in a given year, which is useful for studies that focus on a specified age range who have dropped out of corresponding grades in the previous year (Smith et al., 1996). The concern with this method is that it can be misleading because annual calculations yield the lowest numbers of any dropout calculations, which are rarely audited for accountability (Viadero, 2001). This method determines dropouts based on a

one-year figure, but a four-year figure produces more accurate results because it can track student progress.

The status dropout rate provides cumulative data on dropouts among all 16- through 24-years-olds who are not enrolled in school and who have not earned a high school diploma or its equivalent (Smith et al., 1996). This method takes into account all individuals, regardless of when they last attended school. However, it cannot indicate how well schools are preventing students from dropping out in a given year. Data derived for this model comes from Census Bureau surveys, which allow for self-reporting bias to produce inaccurate figures.

The cohort dropout rate measures a group of students over a specified period of time. This rate is based on repeated measures of a cohort of students sharing similar experiences and reveals how many students starting in a specific grade drop out over time (Smith et al., 1996). “The cohort rate follows an identifiable group of students over time and tracks their progress through the system” (Allensworth & Easton, 2001, p. 7). This method provides a good indication of a ninth grader’s chance of graduating in a particular district.

The disparity in dropout rate definitions has caused some confusion. For example, in 1993 the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) conducted a dropout analysis that raised concerns about the way dropout rates were being reported. The 1994 CGCS report revealed that Chicago had a 45.2 percent four-year dropout rate, New York City had a 15.4 percent rate, and Buffalo had a dropout rate of merely 4.3 percent (as cited in Fossey, 1996). All three of these districts are similar in their demographic makeup, and all three have percentages of minority children and children living in poverty. Richard Fossey concluded in his report that it was unrealistic that the dropout rate in Chicago was three times higher than that of New York, or that Buffalo has a dropout rate one-tenth of Chicago’s. The discrepancy was due to the variance in reporting and calculating rates. Analyzing data provides insight into the dropout problem, but it is traditionally difficult to measure, especially in urban areas where students move from school to school (Cohen, 2003).

Benefits to Increasing the Compulsory Attendance Age

States have realized the increased importance of completing a high school education for entry into postsecondary education and the labor market, but the high school completion rate has only shown minimal gains over the last three decades and has shown no increase throughout the 1990s (Kaufmann et al., 2000). Changing the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18 is one strategy states are employing in an attempt to reduce dropout rates. Within the last four years, numerous states have considered legislation to increase the compulsory attendance age. New Mexico, Connecticut, Louisiana, New York, Texas, and Vermont have recently passed such legislation. The following table ranks high school dropouts in 2000 from Midwestern states that have compulsory attendance age regulated at 18.

Percent of Teens Who Are High School Dropouts (ages 16–19) in 2000

State	National Rank	Dropout Rate Percentage
Minnesota	2	5%
Wisconsin	7	7%
Ohio	13	8%

(Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003)

The Pasadena Independent School District in Texas has seen positive results in decreasing its dropout rate by raising the compulsory attendance age. The state allowed school districts to raise the dropout age from 16 to 17, and this provided districts with “some teeth” to their anti-dropout plans (Schneider, 2000). In addition to raising the age limit, districts—through attendance clerks and counselors—kept excellent tracking records of students who left school and encouraged them to enroll into a GED program or re-enroll back into the school district. For example, in 1998–99, a report from the Texas Education Agency commended Pasadena’s intermediate school district (Grades 7–12) for achieving a record low annual dropout rate of 1.6 percent.

The next table presents the compulsory attendance ages for other states in the Midwest, along with the year the attendance laws were established.

Compulsory Attendance Laws

State	Enactment	Age Limits
Illinois	1883	6–16*
Indiana	1897	7–16
Iowa	1902	6–16
Michigan	1871	6–16**
Minnesota	1885	7–18
Ohio	1877	6–18
Wisconsin	1879	6–18

(Infoplease.com, 2003)

*Illinois: 2003 Legislature introduced House Bill 2584, which would increase the legal dropout age to 18.

**Michigan: 2003 Legislature introduced House Bill 4128, which would increase the dropout age to 18.

Increasing the attendance age is an issue that has garnered support across the country, and in 2002 six states made the push to amend their laws. In states with successful legal passage of new compulsory attendance laws, such as Louisiana and Connecticut, similar language and processes were implemented. In all cases, parents or other persons having control of a child under the age of 18 can withdraw the child from school but must do so with legal written consent. The consent makes clear the decision of the parent to remove the child from school and that the school has offered to provide additional resources to keep the student in school.

Funding for an increase in the compulsory attendance age is difficult to assess and varies widely across states. States such as Louisiana and Montana have outlined fiscal policy analysis that details each state's estimated expenditures for increasing the compulsory attendance age. An explanation of fiscal spending, as well as additional examples of what other states have done to implement laws in support of increasing the compulsory attendance age, can be found in Appendix A.

Arguments Against Changing the Dropout Age

Many who are against raising the compulsory attendance age fear that parental control in the educational process will be further limited. Some in opposition say that public schools have become "laboratories for social engineering and that students are subject to new fads or ideas which may be damaging" (Richman & Kopel, 1996). "Although today's compulsory attendance proponents say their purpose is benign, when the power to control education is concentrated in the hands of a few, it can easily be turned toward less benign objectives" (Woodruff, 2001).

A large advocacy group that has been against an increase in the compulsory attendance age is the homeschooling community. Homeschool advocates have lobbied to keep their right to choose how they would like their children to be educated. Other opponents of raising the attendance age often argue that schools are focused on increasing their funding (funding based on enrollment) instead of concentrating on ways to make schools places where students would voluntarily choose to attend (Richman & Kopel, 1996). However, it is worth noting that the target population for the increase in compulsory attendance age is largely composed of students from families who do not have the resources to homeschool their children. Lawrence Rudner's *Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998* was cited in Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman (2001): "An extensive 1998 study of homeschoolers, although based on a convenience sample, suggests that homeschoolers differ from the general population in parents' educational attainment, household income, parents' marital status, and family size" (p. 4).

In June 1991 and again in February 1994, opponents of compulsory attendance successfully campaigned against an increase in the attendance age from 16 to 18 in Pennsylvania. They argued that compulsory attendance laws take away freedoms. The Pennsylvania Department of Education has not yet presented evidence that increasing the age would be beneficial, and the effort to enroll homeless and migrant students would be challenging and expensive (Richman, n.d.). Richman and Kopel (1996) note, "Teenagers who are kept in school against their will are unlikely to learn very much anyway. And through disruptive or violent behavior, those teenagers may help ruin the education of motivated students."

Much less vocal opponents to increasing the attendance age are the students themselves. "Adolescents leave school because they live surrounded by unemployment and poverty, have experienced failure in school, and have been held back at least once, feel terrible about themselves, and see little hope" (Fine, 1986, p. 397). A report conducted by the

U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in September 2001 (as cited in Kurth, 2001) links truancy to increases in committing crimes, dropping out, and reliance on social services. Many adolescents who leave school early are entrenched in poverty and unemployment. “Nevertheless, there is a clear trend in what students say. They leave because they do not have much success in school and they do not like it. Many of them choose to accept entry-level work or to care for their children, choices that apparently are seen as more attractive than staying in school” (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 376).

Forms of Dropout Prevention

Studies have identified many of the key reasons students drop out of school and what can be done to prevent them from doing so. Decreasing the dropout rate requires the active participation of schools, districts, local communities, parents, and state government working in conjunction with one another. Research has also indicated that to decrease the dropout rate, active partnership between the business, economic, and social sectors of the community is necessary to bring about change (Woods, 1995).

A research study conducted by Jacqueline Aness and Suzanna Wichterle at Columbia University found five key elements that are fundamental in reducing the number of students who drop out of school:

- Small school size, which supports more positive teacher-student relationships.
- Small class size, enabling teachers to provide a challenging curriculum for all students.
- Intellectual habits of mind that mark the school as an intellectual community.
- Portfolio assessments that allow students to demonstrate their learning in multiple and complex ways.
- Staff members chosen for their commitment to the school’s mission and beliefs about teaching and learning. (Aness & Wichterle, 2001)

Truancy as an Indicator

Students who are continually absent from school and fall into truant status are more likely to be at risk of dropping out (Rumberger, 2001). Research has proven that truancy obstructs opportunities for future employment success and is also a major channel into drug use, daytime crime, and violence (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). The U.S. Department of Justice has reported statistics indicating that in some cities daily absentee rates have reached as high as 30 percent (Garry, 1996). It is clear that when students are habitually truant from school, they fall so far behind in their class work that dropping out is an easier option than catching up.

A research study to examine different patterns of truancy—conducted by Wendy Schwartz for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education—analyzed data from surveys taken over a four-year span on students who began high school in 1988. Schwartz (1995)

reported that almost one half of all students surveyed missed at least 10 days of school; one third cut class at least 10 times; and one fourth were late at least 10 times. Research indicates that improving attendance rates is another strategy that contributes to early identification of at-risk students and provides support to dropout prevention programs. Another related study conducted by the Milwaukee Public School (MPS) system highlighted truancy as a factor in predicating students at risk of dropping out. Truancy continues to be a major problem in the MPS system and in turn prompted an internal review by the Office of Audit Services on MPS's dropout prevention and re-enrollment programs. The focus of the review was to understand why the MPS system is plagued with habitual truants and what can be done to get them back into school. The conclusion drawn from the study was that based on the number of students truant, immediate parental involvement and timely resolution of attendance problems are means to improving student attendance (MPS, 2002).

Truancy prevention programs have been established throughout the country, most designed to increase students' desire to return to school. Successful truancy programs aim to offer services for students to overcome personal and social obstacles that primarily lead to a decline in school attendance. Research points to many parallel solutions for decreasing the percentage of students who drop out of school and improving truancy rates. Programs involving schools, law enforcement, families, businesses, judicial and social service agencies, and community youth service organizations will contribute to the decline in both of these rates (Garry, 1996).

An example of how school districts are changing their approach to improving truancy rates is the Los Angeles Unified School District. The district experienced severe troubles with truancy over the years and, in collaboration with the City Attorney's Office, has created a program called Operation Bright Futures. The program involves mailing letters and brochures in multiple languages to parents and guardians explaining California's truancy laws and consequences (Ritsch, 2002). The Los Angeles Unified School District provides counseling, health care, and other resources to help students transition back into school as easily as possible (Ritsch, 2002).

Improving truancy rates requires a coordinated effort. Schools must work with both parents and communities to implement school-based solutions. Schools should play important roles in providing an atmosphere that does not alienate students and is able to continually track performance and behavioral patterns. Research has shown that recruiting truant systems into extracurricular activities is a constructive way of increasing their engagement (Rohrman, 1993). As truancy is a key indicator for at-risk students, so are patterns of significant familial or emotional problems. These issues must be identified early and addressed along with school factors (Mogulescu & Segal, 2002).

Engaging Schools

A comprehensive approach to dropout prevention also focuses on keeping students in school and ensures that time spent in the classroom is engaging and useful. This approach focuses individual student support services around motivating students to learn. A key component of this reform is a review of current school-based policies and practices to redesign and reform those that are not working. Studies have shown that as the disconnection between students and schools increases, so does the likelihood that a student will drop out of school (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

The strongest educational predictor of dropping out is poor academic achievement (Woods, 1995). Also, students who repeat grades or who are over age for their grade are more likely to drop out. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) found that students who drop out see all schooling in relation to their experiences in high school, and in terms of their lack of academic success and disciplinary problems, and these students often decide to terminate this negative situation.

Early success in school may also play an important role in helping students stay in school. A research report written by Donald Hansen (1994) from the University of California–Berkeley found that engaging students at a younger age is a predictor for future student educational success. Hansen’s (1994) report analyzed a study done by some 50 graduate students that traced a group of 117 students from elementary school through high school. He concluded that grade-point average in elementary school alone correctly predicted later schooling status in 45 percent of the cases. Student disengagement from school should be understood as a long-term process, developed over time, beginning with early school experiences.

“Early school failure may act as the starting point in a cycle that causes children to question their competence, weakens their attachment to school, and eventually results in their dropping out” (U.S. GAO, 2002). Studies have shown that poor early academic performance and engagement (for example, absenteeism and disciplinary problems) in both elementary and middle school are indicators that predict early withdrawal from high school (Rumberger, 2001; Woods, 1995).

Engaging students requires an analysis of how school districts work with students who are at risk of dropping out. For an increase in compulsory attendance age to be effective, alternative means of educating students who are continually truant, misbehaved, and pose a threat to themselves or their classmates have to be considered. “Most students who are discharged are not explicitly thrown out. They ‘choose’ to leave, rarely encouraged to stay” (Fine, 1986, p. 404).

School Change

A comprehensive policy for school change should include professional development for teachers and educators. Quality professional development can help teachers and administrators understand the necessity for caring relationships with students and can

also help them convey that caring effectively. “There is evidence now that many students do not believe teachers are very interested in them. To the extent that those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive a less than firm commitment by the institution to educate them, their school effort is not likely to be sincere” (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 390). Genuine relationships between students and educators can ease a disciplinary system where many at-risk students find themselves trapped. According to Susan Black (2002), students who were suspended or expelled became convinced that teachers and administrators no longer wanted them in school. Unsurprisingly, these students became more disruptive, were chronically absent, and gave up trying to pass their courses. Many of them eventually dropped out (Black, 2002).

Another aspect of school change is to challenge traditional models of school organization to make schools more interesting and responsive places where students learn more and can meet higher standards. A research study conducted by Robert Wood and colleagues for Mathematica Policy Research provided an analysis of the impact of school restructuring initiatives. According to their research, “Restructuring strategies should include (1) developing curricular and instructional methods to promote higher-order thinking as well as more active and team-oriented learning, (2) having teachers play a more active role in managing schools, and (3) encouraging schools to be more sensitive to the concerns of their ‘clients’—parents and students” (Dynarski, Gleason, Rangarajan, & Wood, 1998, p. vii).

Alternative Schooling

The educational focus of an alternative school system is usually to provide alternate learning experiences beyond those found in traditional school settings (Atkins, Allen, & Meredith, 2001). Alternative schools offer both a short-term and long-term educational programs. A short-term program is designed to improve student behavior or academic achievement with the intention of returning the student to his or her home school. Short-term programs are especially suitable for elementary or middle school students. Long-term programs may be more specialized, and are often for high school students. Students in long-term programs may be separated from their peers and fellow classmates, but research has indicated that long-term programs are generally more effective than short-term programs because of the employment related skills that are usually integrated into them (Atkins, Allen, Meredith, 2001).

Once a student is ready to return to his or her base school, appropriate programs must be in place to secure a successful transition. Students who find the greatest difficulty adapting back are troubled with the larger class sizes, lack of counselor advisement, lack of involvement within school activities, inconsistent intervention strategies, and the absence of a formal transition program. When students are transitioned back without adequate support and guidance, they will easily fall back to the ways that placed them into the alternative education programs from the beginning.

Former Chicago Public School Chief Executive Paul Vallas (as cited in Whitmire, 2000) witnessed a decrease in dropout rates when failing students were placed into summer

school programs and the district ended social promotions. Alternative and evening schools are also useful in helping students likely to drop out. They are not evidence of harsh systems that push students to drop out, according to Vallas. He thinks “students see evening schools as a second chance” (Whitmire, 2000).

Students in alternative schools are often there because they have shown poor academic performance, they are negative about schooling, or they have had disciplinary problems. Alternative schools are generally better equipped to provide quality education to at-risk students and can often bring dropout-prone students to graduation. Alternative schools can encourage students by providing more individual attention and offering a curriculum that will engage at-risk students (Woods, 1995). For additional examples of alternative education programs, see Appendix B.

Atkins, Allen, & Meredith (2001) have identified six essential components that alternative schools must have to serve students on individualized education programs successfully:

- *Functional Behavior Assessment* – Identification of problem areas that affect the student’s educational achievement, social, and emotional adjustments.
- *Functional Curriculum* – Carefully prepared programs aimed at helping the student achieve individual academic, behavioral, social, and vocational needs.
- *Effective and Efficient Instruction* – Clear and personalized goals that focus on high levels of academic involvement and student effort.
- *Transition Assistance* – Helping students adjust and readjust to the alternative setting or to return to their home school; preparation of the student for independent living.
- *Comprehensive System* – Wrap-around services for the education, treatment, and supervision of a student with disabilities.
- *Appropriate Staff* – Qualified and trained staff, including certified special educators to serve students with emotional or behavioral problems; provisions for parent involvement in student evaluation and decision process; connections to community resources.

Dropout Tracking Systems

Melissa Roderick conducted a study in 1993 that analyzed the academic performances of dropouts beginning from the fourth grade until the students dropped out of school. Her report suggests that differences in academic performance appear as early as the fourth grade, and dropouts demonstrate a pattern of failing grades prior to leaving school (Roderick, 1993). Academic and social climate—attendance rates, students taking advanced courses, and students’ perceptions of a fair discipline policy—can help predict school dropout rates, even after controlling for the background characteristics of the student and the school (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). A tracking system that identifies students with poor grades, truant habits, disciplinary records, and

severe absenteeism could be useful in recognizing at-risk students so additional resources can be provided (Rumberger, 2001).

The state of Delaware, for example, currently maintains a complete dropout database at the state level that contains individual student records, rather than aggregate counts. The tracking system contains the names and addresses of students who drop out, as well as demographic information such as grade, gender, race, date of birth, reason for dropping out, and category of exceptionality. This set of variables has been collected consistently since the 1978–79 school year (Delaware Department of Education, 1995).

Parents' Role in Preventing Dropouts

Parents play an important role in how children perceive and cope with school, and they influence the decisions children make. Children whose parents are actively involved with their schooling are less likely to experience attendance problems and are more likely to graduate (Rumberger, 2001; Schwartz, 1995). The majority of researchers believe that parents provide the encouragement and stability that is vital for a student's success (Bryk & Thum, 1989; McNeal, 1999; Rumberger, 2001). Recent studies have confirmed that strong relationships between students and parents can decrease the likelihood of dropping out of school at any level (Rumberger, 2001). Family-related factors that place children at risk include a dysfunctional home life, no parental involvement, low parental expectations, a non-English-speaking home environment, ineffective parenting or abuse, and high mobility (Wells, 1990).

Conclusion

The dropout problem is so alarming in many high-poverty urban high schools that “powerful comprehensive reforms” are needed to realistically produce significant improvements, according to James McPartland of the Center for the Social Organization of Schooling at Johns Hopkins University (Clowes, 2001). Increasing the compulsory attendance age can be an important component in a comprehensive effort to limit the number of students who drop out of school each year. Research indicates there is no single reason students drop out of school, but that a combination of factors acting together increases the probability.

Family backgrounds combined with student experiences provide insight into why students drop out of school. Socioeconomic factors, together with academic achievement status, are great predictors in determining which students are at risk of dropping out (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Woods, 1995). The economic implications for both the individual and society are some of the reasons for the increased attention to reducing the dropout rate. Millions of dollars in lost revenue, dependency on the welfare system, and higher criminal activity are just a few examples of the costs of dropping out (Rumberger, 1987). The gap in academic success between minority students and that of white students and students from higher income levels is also an issue of great concern.

Understanding the dropout crisis is not a simple task, and improvement requires improvement at all levels. There must be greater consistency in how schools define dropouts, how grades are reported, and how enrollment is calculated if we are to fully understand the issue. According to Richard Fossey, “African-American and Latino children are probably most harmed by inaccurate dropout information. It is in urban systems, where a majority of children of color attend school, that the contrast between published dropout reports and reality is most stark” (Fossey, 1996).

School districts, communities, and parents all play important roles in preventing students from dropping out of school. Implementing a consistent auditing procedure to guarantee that dropout data is being accurately reported by local school districts is an important step. A thorough analysis of truancy rates across school districts nationwide concludes this to be a consistent indicator in predicting students at risk of dropping out. Eileen Garry (1996) suggests in her research study on the importance of combating truancy, “Students who miss school frequently are often unable to develop interpersonal relationships or gain the knowledge and skills they will need for future employment” (p. 6). A successful tracking program will keep a consistent record of student progress and be readily available to school staff. This information will enable staff to work with students to find the educational environment in which they will excel.

In attempting to decrease the dropout rate, in addition to raising the compulsory attendance age, emphasis should focus on meeting the needs of all students, employing such measures as alternative programs, supervised work experience, and additional counseling. For an increase in compulsory attendance age to be effective, alternative means of educating students who are continually truant, misbehaved, and pose a threat to themselves or their classmates have to be considered. Students in alternative schools are often there because they have shown poor academic performance, they are negative about schooling, or they have had disciplinary problems. Alternative schools are generally better equipped to provide quality education to at-risk students and can often bring dropout-prone students to graduation.

With demands for higher standards and greater accountability, it is critical to offer services to students who require a different educational atmosphere to be successful. Increasing the compulsory attendance age can be an important component in a comprehensive effort to limit the number of students who drop out of school each year.

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Appendix A: What Can Be Learned From Other States

Funding for the increase in the compulsory attendance age is difficult to assess, but there are states such as Louisiana that have found a funding solution. Louisiana increased its compulsory attendance age from 17 to 18 in 2001. The state estimated that each year 7,000 seventeen-year-old students drop out of school. The legislation requires that these students remain in school but provides them with a choice in school setting. The state estimated that \$5,319 would be spent per child in FY 2001–02 for these returning students and that the costs be shared between the state and local school districts on 65-percent/35-percent split (Louisiana State Legislature, 2001).

In January of 2003, the Montana Legislature introduced House Bill 274, which increases the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18. Approximately 2,300 students drop out each year in Montana, and the state estimates of these students, 1,125 are 16 years or older. The goal of HB 274 is to reduce by one third the dropout rate among students who are between the ages of 16 and 18. According to these estimates, 375 students would remain in school who would otherwise drop out. It is important to point out that for this fiscal note, the state assumes school districts will not attempt to locate students who have dropped out in prior years and will focus their efforts on maintaining students who are currently enrolled. The bill specifies that state monies fund 61 percent of the high school per-pupil cost, which is an estimated \$3,123. If 375 high school students are retained every year as a result of this legislation, the state will spend an additional \$1,171,125 in K–12 funding beginning in FY 2005 (Montana State Legislature, 2003).

Indiana requires students who want to leave school before reaching 18 to sign a withdrawal form along with their parents and the school principal. Students in Maine can get a waiver to leave early if they have parental permission in writing or have been approved for a program of suitable work-study by the school principal and the local school board (Lohman, 2000).

Pennsylvania has passed laws that allow parents to be fined up to \$300 for truancy and require parents to pay court costs or be sentenced to completing a parenting education program. If the parents are not convicted and the child continues to be truant, the child may be fined up to \$300 or be assigned to an adjudication alternative program (Erie County Bar Association, 2003).

In 1999, Hazel Park became the first district in Michigan to threaten jail for parents of truant students (Kurth, 2001). In Pennsylvania, truant students may have their driving privileges removed for 90 days for the first offense of truancy and 6 months for the second offense. Students who do not have a license are prohibited from applying for a learner's permit for 90 days for the first offense and 6 months for the second offense. Kentucky and North Carolina have the same policy.

In Connecticut, resources are made available to students who return to school after dropping out so that they can make the transition back into school. Connecticut has also enacted into law the opportunity for those 18 and above who are returning to school to

attend adult education programs. Louisiana has created a provision in its legislation that requires school districts to create individual plans of education to maximize the potential of at-risk students and create an atmosphere that is comfortable as well as learning intensive.

House Bill 179 in Georgia would increase the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 17. The current legislation was read and introduced in the Assembly Education Committee. The General Assembly has approved a law that would keep teens who have dropped out of school from being able to drive. The result of this legislation has resulted in thousands of license suspensions, but it has not been enacted long enough to realize its impact on the dropout rate (Salzer, 1999).

Appendix B: Alternative Education Programs

Changing the compulsory attendance age generally has a better chance of producing successful results when enacted in conjunction with alternative education programs. There are several programs that have proven successful in providing alternative means to reach at-risk students.

The Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District in Michigan has implemented a program that incorporates all sectors of the community to improve the social climate of local school districts. The Search Institute has created a developmental asset framework that identifies 40 positive building blocks—called the GivEm 40—that its research indicates provide the resources necessary for young people to succeed. The data indicates the role assets play in protecting young people from risky behaviors (including dropping out) and promotes behaviors that lead to future success. The GivEm 40 coalition was founded by the local United Way chapter and is a multiorganizational partnership that includes over 25 school districts. The fundamental goal of GivEm 40 is to build a more supportive school and community environment for healthy youth development. School-based mentoring programs, increase in community involvement, rise in student participation, and the resurgence in individuals committing time and personal assets to students are all successful outcomes of the program. According to the *GivEm 40* Web site, “The positive and uplifting approach provided by assets builds powerful bonds between the efforts of educators, parents, citizens, and community organizations” (GivEm 40 Coalition, 2003).

Kansas has created an initiative called the Diversified Educational Experiences Program (DEEP). This program allows instructors to create academic environments that emphasize success for every student while decreasing student hostility to educational institutions. DEEP offers a new way to bridge the gap between the students and the institution for Grades 9–12. Students enrolled in DEEP identify their own needs, formulate objectives, develop tasks based on those objectives, present group and individual projects, receive teacher reviews, and participate in their own evaluations (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Teachers are trained as learning facilitators, and the conflict-management process is based on consultation and peer group interaction as well as on teacher-student interaction. Classrooms are highly structured, but teachers have the flexibility to change the methods of instruction to engage the needs of their students. Developmental funding for DEEP was through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title III (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

New York has created a program called City-As-School (CAS) that combines academic learning with real-world experiences in the workforce. The U.S. Department of Education has approved this program and classified CAS as a successful alternative educational program. CAS connects students directly with learning experiences throughout the community, specializes in small class sizes, and provides weekly forums for discussion on a wide range of topics that range from social to academic to guidance. The results of this program include improvements in attendance; increases in the course completion rate of students; and better student attitudes toward schooling, career, and adults (U.S.

Department of Education, 1995). This program allows students to be engaged in the world around them and to continue in school at the same time. CAS combines both academic and community experience, so students are ready to enter the job market well prepared and with a high school diploma. The program was funded through the National Diffusion Network at the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

Iowa created a program called the DeLasalle model, which is an individualized program of special services grouped with a core academic curriculum for students who have dropped out of Grades 9–12 to help them improve their academic skills and complete their high school education (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). The goals of the program are to increase school attendance, improve academic skills, and enhance self-esteem and educational attitudes in students who have dropped out of high school. “DeLasalle employs a variety of programming features and services in a comprehensive model to allow every student to be successful in his or her education” (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). The DeLasalle model provides a supportive, nontraditional school structure; a small student-teacher ratio; individualized learning; student contracting; intensive counseling; vocational skill training; and a diagnostic, prescriptive teaching process. The cost of this program is similar to costs in a public school system. According to the U.S. Department of Education (1995), estimates are that this program can serve up to 160 students, and financial support for teachers, materials, office space, and so forth is generated through a combination of private and public funding.