DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 457 EA 017 987

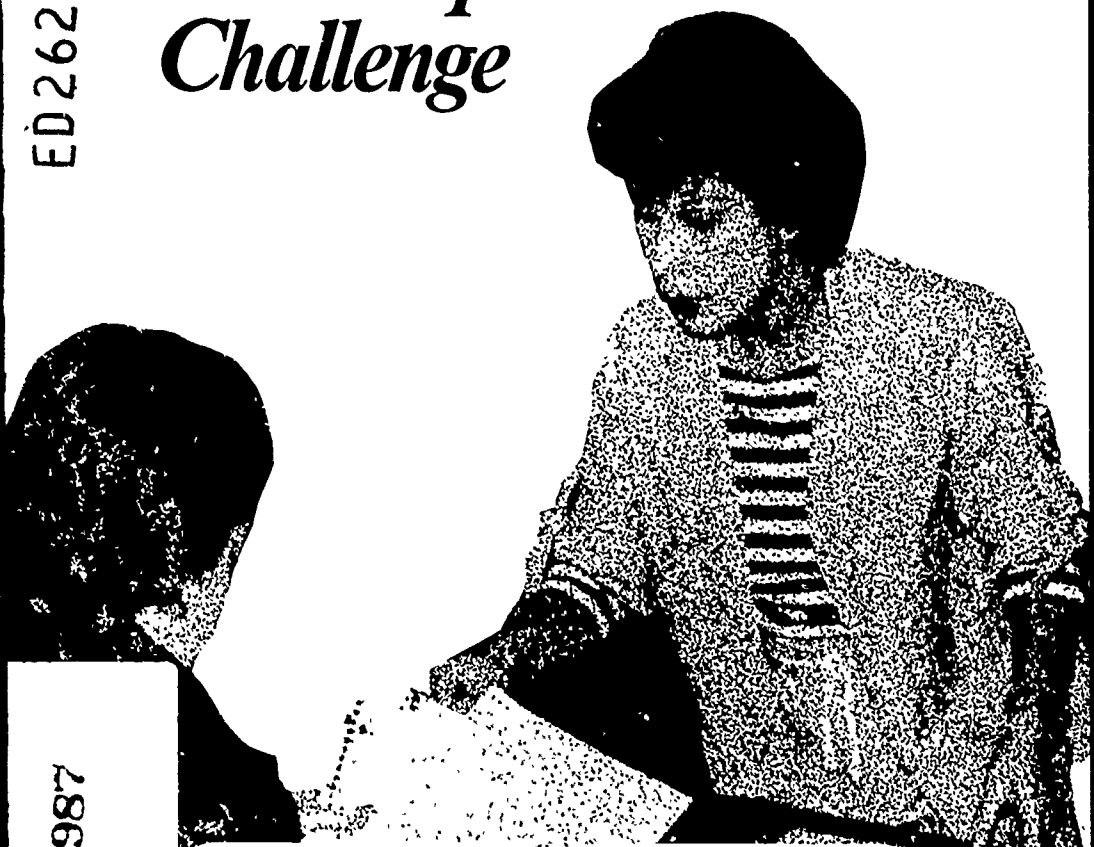
AUTHOR Bowen, Jeffrey M.; Lipkowitz, Debra L.
TITLE Staying in School: The Dropout Challenge. A Position Paper.
INSTITUTION New York State School Boards Association, Albany.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 28p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Dropout Characteristics; *Dropout Prevention; *Dropout Programs; Dropouts; Educational Innovation; Elementary Secondary Education; High School Equivalency Programs; Individual Differences; Nontraditional Education; Parent Participation; Potential Dropouts; School Counseling; School Organization; Student Adjustment; Student Alienation; Student Needs; Student Promotion; Student School Relationship
IDENTIFIERS New York; Operation Success

ABSTRACT

Students drop out of school for a wide variety of reasons. Programs to discourage dropping out must therefore accommodate the actual needs of individual students rather than aim at the assumed needs of the "typical dropout." This document reviews school policies and programs that could affect dropout tendencies positively. Among these innovative methods are providing alternatives to traditional student promotion policies, offering early childhood education programs, structuring education in nontraditional ways, coordinating social services for student support, operating high school equivalency programs, creating alternative learning environments suited to the specific needs of dropouts, adopting inschool suspension policies, and involving parents in dropout prevention. Examples are drawn from successful programs in New York State. (PGD)

Staying in School: The Dropout Challenge



A Position Paper of the
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Acknowledgement

The Board of Directors is grateful to all members of the staff who worked so diligently to prepare this paper. Special notice is due the efforts of Dr. Jeffrey M. Bowen, administrator of Research and Development, and Debra L. Lipkowitz, research assistant, for preparing the original manuscript.

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Preface

There is a basic contradiction in what is happening in public education today. We have too many in-school dropouts. Their suspension rates are higher, their vandalism, violence, and drug abuse are greater. Perhaps these students . . . should be considered dropouts because their needs are not being met to any greater degree than those who officially drop out. We're trying; we simply do not have the resources. We need more alternative programs, and there's not enough funding for the basic program. I suggest to you that what we will be experiencing is a bruised generation of young people until we get our act together.

Joan Raymond, Superintendent
Yonkers City Schools, 1984

Dr. Raymond gives the term *dropout* a new meaning. It suggests the great responsibility of our public schools is to help children stay—both physically and psychologically, despite inadequate resources and the bruises our society inflicts.

The challenge to our schools becomes more understandable, though no less frustrating, when one realizes our schools' functions often cannot be separated from the social, economic, and cultural changes within American life. As various ills and deficiencies in our civilization become evident, and as institutional mainstays such as the family unit shift in new directions, the public school mission appears to expand out of necessity.

Is the primary function of school to provide instruction in basic skills and knowledge, or is it to actively oversee *both* academic and social development of students? The plight of students who have dropped out or are at risk of doing so, makes clear answers to these questions critically important. Research on students at risk touches on a variety of social issues, including juvenile delinquency, suicide, teen-age pregnancy, and unemployment. In 1980, half of all persons arrested were teen-agers, and the delinquency rate among dropouts was three times higher than that for students in school. Between 1970 and 1980, the suicide rate for those aged 16 to 24 doubled. Statistics suggest that teen-age pregnancy increases the likelihood of dropping out. Almost 25 percent of all girls who drop out are pregnant, and 14 percent of the boys who drop out do so because they have families to support. More than half of all dropouts regret their decision afterward. How should the schools respond to these combined frustrations?

In certain instances the schools' response has proven controversial and difficult to document. There are claims that some potential dropouts who present disciplinary problems are classified deliberately as handicapped and moved into special education classes. Pregnant students are regarded at times as social outcasts whose poor example must be hidden from other students. Interviewed dropouts often have identified teachers and principals as the individuals who encouraged them to drop out and stay out. Yet there are other responses which reflect a firm commitment to solving a widespread and complex problem.

The dropout dilemma is not strictly educational, nor does it focus on a small segment of students who have left school after the age of sixteen. Rather, school initiatives tell us it is a broad-based problem of early adolescence, youth unemployment, changing family structure and economic instability. Throughout the State, districts of all sizes and demographic characteristics are approaching common problems in unique and innovative ways.

The following policy analysis and recommendations are distilled from discussions on major issues surrounding dropouts. As a guide for both state and local policies, the paper should help set an agenda for cooperative action over the next several years. The policymakers of governments and agencies are welcome to join in promoting New York State's leadership in helping its youth stay in school.

Characteristics of Dropouts

Because students are individuals, their reasons for dropping out are individualized. In an attempt to identify potential dropouts, one may use research findings to attribute a list of "typical characteristics" to the individual. Although these "typical characteristics" offer clues to the reasons why students leave school, they do not automatically draw a composite of a "typical dropout".

The "average" dropout demonstrates low academic achievement, slowness in acquiring reading and math skills, and earns low standardized test scores. Low self-esteem and motivation, non-involvement in extracurricular activities, high incidence of suspension, and negative home experiences are also evident. Those who do drop out have difficulties which cause the greatest conflicts with the realities and expectations of school life.

The dropout population mirrors the community as a whole. Just as communities differ, so may the needs and problems of their dropouts. Negative home experiences, for instance, may be economic or emotional. Poor test scores may indicate a bright, unchallenged or underachieving student as well as one in dire need of skill remediation.

Some reliance can be placed on general identifiers, especially if they help determine dropout candidates as early as possible during their school years. Programs should be organized around the *individual* circumstances which give the student reasons to drop out.

Typical reasons students give range from lack of clean or presentable clothing to feelings of unfair treatment at school by peers or teachers. Newburgh City Schools, currently operating a state-funded attendance-improvement dropout prevention program, confronts another typical reason for dropping out. This involves two-income families with parents who commute to New York City and leave the house before the children. These parents *may not even be aware* that their children are not attending school.

It is clear that we can find direction for combating the dropout problem from typical characteristics, causes, and reasons. Yet it also is clear that each district and region must then learn about what is typical among its own students to streamline and tailor an effective program.

The Dropout Rate: Cause for Alarm?

In the last 80 years of public schooling, there has been an almost unimaginable rise in expectations for students. With educational services extensively tailored to meet the needs of special populations, more children than ever are effectively reached by the public schools. Schools have been extraordinarily successful at making mass education work with ever greater efficiency. At the turn of the century, 17 percent of school-age children earned high school diplomas. In 1930, 35 percent received diplomas. By 1965, 66 percent completed high school. At 75 percent in 1980, the schools have no reason to be defensive.

Despite these statistics, dropouts are a major educational problem. Concern for the dropout problem often emerges from dialogue on high unemployment rates, waning job opportunities, the need to improve labor productivity, the problems of juvenile delinquency and jail overcrowding, and the cost of public assistance programs. The cause for alarm over dropouts is not limited to the educational issue, but also relates to adverse effects on the social and economic foundations of society.

Youth unemployment statistics provide some startling revelations. Dropouts represent seven percent of the total New York State student population. Yet, they account for 58 percent of unemployed youth. A recent survey by the National League of Cities revealed that high school dropouts present the most difficult problems among all jobless groups.

There seem to be two markedly different youth unemployment problems. One exists for high school students and graduates who are employable, possess adequate work behaviors and skills and can benefit directly from any cyclical upturn in the economy. On the other hand, dropouts generally do not have the skills to seek and keep a job, and many are not actively seeking employment. For them, economic recovery periods mean little or nothing. Whether public policy is "supply-side", waiting for economic conditions to improve, or "demand-side", with government creating jobs, the unemployment problem of dropouts remains unchanged.

The dropout problem does cause alarm; it should also cause introspection. Alarm may produce piecemeal, stopgap measures which

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simply add to the incohesive way these youngsters have been approached in the past. Introspection, however, can lead to clear policy and produce innovative methods of cooperation.

The interdependence of education and a healthy society and economy never has been so widely proclaimed as it is now. At the turn of the century, a lack of formal education was the norm. Functioning well in society was not contingent upon completing high school. Today however, the world will advance only as far as the competencies of our youth can carry it, and society will bear the burden of those who have been left behind.

Social Promotion

The issue of social promotion raises serious questions about the validity of our school grading system. Despite ample research confirming that every child has a unique style and rate of learning, the public schools perpetuate a system which links academic advancement with chronological age. However, grade advancement means little educationally if skills are not mastered. The stigma and resulting frustrations for the student who is "left back", the low self-esteem, lack of interest in extra-curricular activity and waning motivation may only be aggravated.

Nowhere is there a clearer need for carefully designed alternative programming than in this area. Individualized programs and early identification of learning problems should be top priorities as ways to prevent the difficulties social promotion can create. In the shorter range, to cope with the problems of current candidates for social promotion, programs should be redesigned to deal with *both* the social and academic development of the students.

For example, the promotional "gates" program in New York City has successfully remediated students by maintaining two basic principles: (1) keep the peer group together in remedial classes; and (2) make sure that the work is taught differently the second time around to provide a new educational experience. One mathematics "gates" class uses a diagnostic-prescriptive arithmetic program which teaches basic concepts through intensive visual exercises before using pencil and paper. This strategy has proven equally successful in several other states.

As with every issue affecting dropouts, the problems and approaches to solving them are shared by districts of all sizes and locations. The same principles seen in the "gates" concept can be found elsewhere. The Pinewood Opportunity Center in Norwood was started from the combined efforts of districts in St. Lawrence and Lewis Counties. Superintendents brought common concerns for the neglected portion of the student population—the rebellious, "turned-off" student.

The result was an alternative 9th and 10th grade program housed in a separate building on the campus of the occupational center. Here traditional concepts of schooling are suspended. Readiness rather than systematized promotion is the key to advancement. A student gains academic and employment skills via a curriculum based on an Erie County model of one week in school, one week on the job. There is also a gain in confidence, both socially and educationally, so a student can successfully return to the home school to complete requirements toward a high school diploma.

An extremely important facet of the Pinewood Center is the degree of cooperation and support between community and staff, an indispensable ingredient in all programs of this type. At Pinewood, there is cooperation among school staff, administration, BOCES, community-based service organizations and businesses in developing and maintaining the physical plant and the program offerings. Students have the option to work for and with local police departments, hospitals, libraries, car dealerships, colleges, offices and farms. Now servicing approximately 70 students, staffing includes a principal/work-study coordinator, three teachers, a secretary, part-time custodian, and several retirees.

The question of social promotion or retention can be rendered obsolete if, as these programs urge, traditional concepts of grade advancement are suspended. Rather than asking, "Do we leave back or push through?", the question should be, "What can we do differently to help this child succeed?" Schools should be able to coordinate funding and programs available to ensure successful innovation.

Early Childhood Programs

One way to prevent the cumulative negative effects of social promotion is the use of early childhood educational programs. Thereby, a child's disadvantages can be dealt with before traditional schooling begins. Because the frustration of falling behind one's peers may never materialize, the child who has benefited from an early program may never confront the temptation to drop out of school during adolescence.

The pre-kindergarten strategy has proven successful. Particularly when applied to children from low-income backgrounds, early intervention has produced lasting benefits. In *As the Twig is Bent*, a consolidated analysis of preschool studies conducted during the last 20 years, Irving Lazar reports the following consistent findings:

- increased individual scores on IQ tests which remain statistically significant for several years after the preschool experience,
- higher achievement scores especially during elementary school,
- decreased likelihood of placement in special education or remedial classes, and increased likelihood of meeting high school's ordinary requirements and graduation,
- higher self-esteem and value placed on achievement, and
- increased labor market participation in late adolescence and early adulthood.

Parallel findings are associated with New York State's analyses of its pre-kindergarten programs and a recent comprehensive assessment of 1,500 reports on Head Start.

Non-traditional Structure and Flexibility

Educators, politicians, and the general public often do not know how to make schools serve everyone well. Some students may need experiences public schools cannot, or perhaps. should not offer. They may have desperate problems which would be aggravated and prolonged by the school setting and structure.

If the primary task of schools is instruction in basic knowledge and skill reinforcement, as opposed to enforcement of basic social behavior, it may be valid to question the relevance of conventional schooling for all children at an age when they may be old enough to choose more suitable alternatives. Although contemporary efforts to secure educational equity for all youth may suggest that they all belong in traditional school settings, learning and socialization for some students may occur only in alternative programs. Encouraging dropouts to return to the institutional setting from which they were first alienated may not always make sense, and may be counterproductive.

There used to be ample employment opportunities for a student leaving school without a diploma, including the military and various non-skilled entry level positions. Rarely is this true today. Accordingly, the public schools should try to arrange a way for dropouts to recoup educational losses and gain the self-management skills which will erase poor work habits and failure. Alternative programs, coordinated by public schools and cooperatively supported by state, regional, and community-based agencies, may provide the best setting for this.

Experienced-Based Career Education (EBCE) is one such concept. Sponsored by the National Institute of Education, EBCE attempts to close the gap between classroom study and experience. Vestal Central Schools conducts an EBCE program that is incorporated into the Evergreen Alternative High School. With assistance in 1982 from federal funds and BOCES staff, the school was established two years ago to serve 30 students from both the Vestal and Union Endicott districts.

Students over 16 years old often feel alienated from the academic world and impatient to be out in the real working world. These youth may benefit from working in the adult community. Therefore, community volunteers serve as resource people, sharing their skills with interested students. The relationship is reminiscent of an apprenticeship, and gives the student an opportunity to learn skills and develop the working behaviors employers seek.

In its first year, three sites were used for Evergreen students—a veterinary office, a department store and a service station. Students attend academic classes at their "school", housed on the second floor of a junior high school. With its own staff and newsletter, the school has continued to receive support and to expand its community resources and student participation.

The "Evergreen" project recognizes that youth over sixteen can and should be in school, and that the needs of disfranchised youth can be approached cooperatively by staff, community, and related agencies.

The structure and procedures of schools send clear messages to students. Those marginal students who live on the outskirts of society after school hours easily reject a school which does not recognize within its organization their need to work, to have their baby cared for during the day, or to have an adult role model for guidance. Overused out-of-school suspension policies may communicate the attitude that students do not have a rightful place within the school community. Inadequate record-keeping procedures for students entering and leaving school provoke abuse of attendance regulations by implying the unimportance of students' whereabouts. Such messages only add to the inclinations of students to stay away from school.

Research, most notably that of James Coleman in 1966, indicated that no matter what the schools do or do not do, they cannot overcome student background characteristics. By implication, schools had little impact on student achievement. If this were true, then behaviors leading to dropping out would show up in a child's character early on. Therefore, biases of school programs would have little, if any, influence on the student predisposed to dropping out. Fortunately, effective schools research, including later work by Coleman contradicting his earlier conclusions, shows us that schools do make a difference and the messages they send out to students through their social and instructional programs can contribute to a student's decision to remain in school or drop out.

Operation Success

This can be seen clearly in the evaluation results for Operation Success, a project designed for high-risk students, those who drop out or give every indication that they may leave school early. The project was designed by the Federation Employment and Guidance Services (FEGS) and funded by the New York State Education Department in cooperation with the New York City Board of Education, the United Federation of Teachers, and a variety of government, private sector and community leaders. FEGS is unique in its ability to provide

The positive effect of Operation Success on the three target high schools spilled over into the general school population as well. Total attendance rose an overall four percent and general enrollment rose ten percent. . .

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educational, vocational, and treatment services to between 50,000 and 70,000 people a year in the greater New York area through coordination of government, private and voluntary providers. A complete spectrum of health, child care and counseling services is represented.

As Alfred Miller, executive director of FEGS, stated in a 1983 address before the United States Senate Caucus on Children, the pursuit of excellence could mean the coming of an "educational triage" which would allow students who are gifted or who are "problem" students in the traditional school environment to fall by the wayside. The 50 percent of students who drop out in the large urban districts represent the gifted *and* the problem students who have sensed the inbred bias of the school environment.

Students identified as potential Operation Success participants receive a "success gram", a positive approach which catches the interest

of both parent and students. Sent to the student, the success gram presents the program as a special array of services and opportunities. From the start, the student is treated as a special individual with unique needs and talents which are worthy of attention.

A recent evaluation of Operation Success by the Queens College Center for Labor and Urban Programs yielded promising results, particularly in student perceptions of school and school success. Ninety-three percent of the 2,000 students enrolled in Operation Success at the beginning of the 1982-83 school year were still enrolled or had graduated at year's end. These were "high risk" students, identified and referred by their home schools as likely to drop out. In addition to this high retention rate, more than 200 students were brought back into the school. Seventy percent of the "high risk" group who were eligible to graduate in June 1983 did so, and none of those remaining dropped out of school.

The positive effect of Operation Success on the three target high schools spilled over into the general school population as well. Total attendance rose an overall four percent and general enrollment rose ten percent, compared to an eight percent decline the previous year.

What happened to change these students' attitudes towards school? What barriers were torn down to convince the youths that the programs were for and not against them? The evaluation revealed major changes in student opinions of school. Before taking part in Operation Success, 60 percent felt school prepared them for a career, in contrast to 85 percent after. Similarly, only half of the students felt that they belonged in school before participating in the program. An additional third shared that feeling after the program. Perceptions of teacher and parent attitudes also were modified. Eighty-five percent of "success" students felt teachers were willing to help them with their work, where barely half were of that opinion previously. Two-thirds were convinced that their parents liked the school they attended. Less than half believed that before enrollment.

These positive results come from a student population whose families earn between $4,000 and $8,000 annually. Personal contact, modified programs geared to individual needs, and positive reinforcement for success are the special ingredients used in proper proportions which make Operation Success work.

For students once prone to alienation and the belief that schools just do not care, Operation Success proves that if given the chance, most will take it. The project also shows that without acknowledgment of vocational, parenting and general educational needs in a school, the implied bias will continue to drive many away, and, with them, brighter futures.

Dealing With Students' Social Problems

Perhaps the greatest dilemma facing public education is the lack of agreement as to what the specific purposes and functions of the schools should be. There is an inclination by some to expect schools to be responsible for a child's holistic well-being, overcoming the social problems which may impede educational fulfillment. Career counseling, day care programs, work-study opportunities, and social casework appear to be necessary additions if many students are going to succeed. Current reports, studies, and state actions on educational standards suggest that the basic business of schooling involves the teaching of academic skills and competencies within a structure which will afford students a viable transition into the adult world. Achievement tests do not measure social skills. Regardless of what schools do, they are held accountable by the public for failures in dealing with social problems of the young.

With this in mind, there should be an objective survey of social and educational agencies and their capabilities to contribute to a cohesive program for students. The importance of a unified effort can be seen clearly in recent research pertaining to early adolescence. Having observed successful middle schools, Joan Lipsitz, in her *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents,* has written that schools must "use their knowledge of the psychological stages (of child development) to help students learn".

To do this, schools should serve as the catalyst by bringing together various social and educational agencies to provide the services needed by students which the schools alone cannot offer. If, for example, agencies deal separately with problems of counseling, nutrition, and youth employment, the overall program for the child will be fragmented dangerously at a time when focus and structure are most important. This need is most evident in dealing with the problems of teen-age pregnancy and parenthood. The continuum of services suggested by the needs of male and female students includes academic instruction, parenting instruction, hygiene, day care, work study opportunity, and personal and group counseling. To be effective, these activities must be facets of a complete program. As the major institutional contact, schools must take the initiative to coordinate the services they offer with those of local human service agencies to promote a cohesive program.

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Peer counseling relies upon yet another resource for dealing with social *and* academic problems—students themselves! Students helping students is a concept which can be realized in all districts and has been shown to effect positive results. Such efforts may take the form of tutorial or "rap" sessions where students can discuss problems more easily with one another. Peer counseling adds a dimension of belonging and acceptance.

A fully coordinated program should build in a component specifically designed for dropout "retrieval", with organizational sensitivity to the scheduling and employment needs of returning students. Schools should be the place where a student who has dropped out will be welcomed back with a positive attitude. In addition, the school should be the vehicle through which the returning student will find direction for obtaining the other services needed for a successful return to academic life.

High School Equivalency Programs

In the study, *High School and Beyond,* more than 50 percent of dropouts polled felt their decision to drop out was a poor one and actively sought re-entry or training programs within one year after dropping out. Their actions suggest a lack of skills or abilities which prevent them from functioning productively in the labor force. High school equivalency programs are the alternative to further failure for many of these individuals. The programs offer a chance to acquire basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills as well as self-management and job skills, with the added incentive of the high school diploma upon successful completion. But are equivalency programs meant to be equivalent and, if so, in what ways?

If school is defined as a provider of basic skills and knowledge, it can be argued that equivalency of instructional opportunities should be the mainstay of programs for dropouts. However, the importance of socialization for these students cannot be ignored. Dropouts often experience difficulties in social adjustment, and usually academic remediation alone will not lead a dropout to reenter the business world successfully.

The Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools conducted a study of what business and industry are most concerned about in hiring school graduates. Basic reading and mathematical skills ranked only fourth and fifth, mentioned by 65 percent and 56.5 percent of those responding. The *top* three items were dependability—i.e., coming to work regularly and on time (94 percent); proper attitudes about work and being able to accept supervision (82 percent); and getting along and being able to deal with people (74 percent).

Accordingly, there is a need to remediate socialization skills as well as the academic. Here, equivalency should extend to the social development skills fostered in a regular school program. Where necessary, programs for dropouts should include prescribed treatments of counseling, social casework, special education, or behavior modification to assure student self-reliance upon completion.

Overregulated, inflexible programs for high school equivalency are counterproductive. Artificial restraints such as required hours of instruction and class size are less important than having a learning environment which addresses returning dropout needs. Those who seek high school equivalency programs cannot be typified. Some of the brightest students do drop out and also must be served. The

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programs for these students should present challenges which were lacking the first time around.

For this reason among others, flexibility in the program is of utmost importance. Every district should have its own individually tailored equivalency plan, including goals and objectives, student eligibility, staffing, provision for career guidance, methods to measure students' progress, and evaluation of program effectiveness. Rigidity must not be confused with structure. Program rigidities which push many young people out of school should not be repeated in a high school equivalency program.

One approach to student retrieval is an alternative program run by the Livingston-Steuben-Wyoming BOCES, an area experiencing an approximate five percent dropout rate, or 210 students in 1981-82. The expansive needs of returning dropouts are recognized by the four components: vocational, academic and psychological testing; placement in an occupational course at the BOCES Center; academic classes to prepare for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) test; and a paid work assignment on at least a part-time basis. This last facet is of particular importance, for any dropout who has been working is unlikely to give up a paycheck to return to school. That paycheck represents a life achievement and, as such, a source of pride and independence.

A realistic approach to reentry is proposed with specific performance objectives, including appropriate assessment for student placement in the program components, ensuring that students learn employable skills upon completion of the program, personal counseling and help with life skills, and an instructional program to ensure achievement of a high school diploma.

Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) eligibility screening is done by the Office of Employment and Training in Livingston and Wyoming Counties. The program coordinator makes the referrals to that office. The continual relationship of the coordinator to the students is extremely important to the success of the program. Aside from monitoring student progress, the coordinator is available to counsel students, should problems disrupt the training program. Psychological services and a social worker are available, if necessary. Individual programming and emphasis on job readiness instruction help ensure student success.

On a smaller scale, the work-study concept has been used successfully in the Little Falls School District. With a current enrollment of under 1,400, Little Falls has had a 98 percent success rate. Over the past few years, only two of the 100 students who entered the program failed to finish. Academics in the morning, along with counseling, give students the chance to work afternoons. Coordination between the school and employer is a high priority, and their close relationship with the students has resulted in several going to institutions for higher education.

Similarly, Corning-Painted Post, a largely rural area, has reached into the co.nmunity to return dropouts to its alternative high school, completely supported by local funds.

These efforts represent a variety of areas, funding sources and numbers to be taught; however, they are based on the same principles of coordination of services and recognition of the uniqueness of the students they wish to serve.

Alternative Programs for the Potential Dropout

The potential dropout's lack of identification with the school community requires the creation of a new identity among those with similar difficulties. An alternative learning environment can be designed with the objective of emphasizing academic success for every learner while simultaneously developing "coping" skills.

Having the chance to successfully enter the labor market depends upon decreasing student hostility, failure, frustration, and alienation, which the traditional school setting simply cannot do with its limited resources. Acceptance by students of social conventions and behaviors must be nurtured in a less threatening environment. Potential dropouts often lack the ability to manage their own schedules, or to interact and communicate well.

Dropping Out and Early Adolescence

As recently as 1983, research on adolescence at the University of North Carolina has indicated that the move from elementary school into the middle school configuration is a major turning point in the lives of students. For those students with an early inclination toward alienation, the change from the unified learning environment of the elementary school to the departmentalized secondary structure often proves too great to handle. In these years truancy and delinquency peak for both male and female students. Educational literature often refers to middle school as a time of transition. Change manifests itself in several different ways. First, the student experiences physical and psychological changes, which require adjustment. Generally, passage into this period of schooling also means adjustment to a new building, new class and scheduling structures, new authority figures, and new, older classmates. A student can easily lose confidence and sense of self amidst the disruptions and pressures of this time. At no other point in a child's development is orientation so important.

Numerous programs for dropout prevention are appearing at the junior high level. At this stage, when students may be unable to relate effectively to peers and adults, behaviors which inhibit them academically and socially can be identified and remedied. An alternative program in Little Falls suggests that early identification is possible and can best be handled in a non-traditional setting.

Another example is the Summit School in Auburn, an experience-based alternative education program for 7th and 8th graders served by the Cayuga-Onondaga BOCES. Dealing with career options through

community placements and learning positive job-related behaviors are major focal points of this project. Between 20 and 30 students are enrolled at a per pupil cost of $3,300, which is charged back to the district. Parents and students enter into a contract which fully outlines attendance and discipline policy.

Alternative High Schools

Programs outside the school are resources not to be overlooked in developing alternatives which address the students' needs. Distinction must be made, however, between programs in community or governmental agencies, and the school program. The latter focuses on education, the former may not. There is a need for dropouts to develop the personal communication skills which effect healthy academic and vocational situations. To acquire these social skills, the student must function within the school community despite the fact that part of the student's program may be contained elsewhere.

One interesting concept is the P.M. Alternative School in the Middle Country School District in Centereach. Just as students are leaving Centereach High School, the P.M. students begin their school day, which runs from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. The sessions include instruction in English, social studies, math, science, business education and physical education. Once a student is recommended and becomes a P.M. student, all past school problems are "forgotten" and the youth starts with a clean slate. "Emancipated minors" caught in a legal limbo and living in temporary quarters, youngsters from difficult home environments, pregnant and sexually-active teens, and those whose behaviors are simply resistant to school structure are just a sample of those served by P.M.

The school is located entirely in one wing of the high school, which gives the student a sense of belonging in the school and involvement in the school community. Begun in 1982, the program serves approximately 30-45 students a year, two-thirds of them boys between 16 and 18 years of age.

The goal of P.M. is to have students acquire the basic skills which have eluded them in the regular school setting and the behaviors which will allow them to be successful in a job or in the educational mainstream when they return.

Grading is based on equal thirds in categories of behavior (which includes academic achievement levels), attitude (the response to the P.M. setting), and attendance. Since most students referred to P.M. have been chronic truants or class-cutters, attendance is stressed as soon as they enter. Students and parents are aware of the expectations of the program and no student is left in the dark as to his or her future.

Every youngster is reviewed for reentry into the regular school every 30 days. Testimony to the success of P.M. is that all but one of the 45 students enrolled last year were returned to regular classes.

The promising future of alternative programs, may be threatened by new requirements for diplomas which will increase costs, if new cooperative resources and views of existing and future aids are not considered simultaneously with new regulations. However, it is clear that alternative programming has come into its own as an equal solution, rather than as an instrument to keep troubled and troublesome youth in holding patterns.

In-school Suspension

Such is the case with effective in-school alternatives to suspension. Too many student disciplinary practices are simply a quick response to student misbehavior rather than a systematic attempt to get at and remedy the cause of the misbehavior. If designed carefully, an in-school suspension alternative will be an effective cure while helping the student develop self-discipline and continue instruction without interruption. An extra benefit may be a reduction in the number of out-of-school suspensions which can disrupt the community and literally suspend the child's contact with the nurturing school setting.

The rationale for starting the "Time Out Room" in Northport High School identifies major arguments for in-school suspension. Usually there is no close, at-home supervision for out-of-school suspendees, yet there is a need to rekindle academic motivation. A positive alternative to suspension, the Time Out Room is staffed with teachers and other professionals trained in crisis/remediation strategies and development/intervention activities. The activities include disciplinary referrals, guidance, structured study for students, seminars on success, and return to classes. Community support is given by professional counseling resources, tutoring, a drug and alcohol task force, and parent education groups.

School boards should encourage in-school alternatives to suspension not only because this strategy tends to protect and preserve educational opportunity for those who need it the most, but also because it provides a positive method for resolving a child's problems rather than avoiding them.

Above all, alternative programming should be rooted in the belief that learning is a continuous process and the image projected should be one in which the door is always open and accessible to those wishing to return. Programs with work study options, day care provisions, and career counseling elements have proven successful in drawing and keeping dropouts. These programs can serve as models for programs to come.

The Importance of Parental Involvement in Dropout Prevention

Parental involvement has a major impact on educational achievement. As the Board of Regents related in its 1982 policy statement on *Youth Education and Employment,* relationships between school and community are strained at best in disadvantaged areas where the parents' socio-economic problems overshadow difficulties a son or daughter may have in school. If parents' expectations and awareness of what is happening in school can be raised, those of the student may follow more easily.

Dramatic evidence of this point comes from studies of such preschool programs as Head Start. Mandated involvement of parents in committees required for program funding—and other less formal methods of relying upon parents of Head Start youngsters such as parental study circles or use of parents as volunteers, aides, or social workers—have encouraged greater continuity between the home and school environments of children. The parents of preschool children in programs also tend to hold higher occupational expectations for their children than do the parents of control groups.

Parental involvement is one of the three important dimensions in a rapidly growing Buffalo-based program designed to join the home, school, and community in a mutally supportive effort to help prepare children to become responsible adults. Funded by private and government sources, EPIC—Effective Parenting Information for Children—offers workshops for the parents or guardians of children throughout the community. Parents thus have an opportunity to share concerns and problems about their children, while at the same time strengthening their parenting skills with assistance from home volunteers. The volunteers or facilitators represent the community's involvement and commitment to the EPIC program.

The home link with school is often the weakest for potential dropouts. Questions of legal guardianship which particularly abound among those in large urban areas may further separate home from school. Rightly then, other relationships—counselor or teacher to student, peer groups, vocational opportunities, to cite a few—can help to keep youth in school.

Some collaborative projects are succeeding. In New York City, often a child's home is not known. A massive effort has been launched by the NYC Board of Education to insure that school-age children of homeless families being housed by the city in hotels get to school, keep up attendance and receive the support services they need to do this. A painstaking process, the project involves a team of attendance

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teachers literally knocking on doors in the 56 hotels and temporary shelters housing families. More than 3,000 children have been located. Major goals are to: (1) insure that children are registered in a school when feasible and desired by the parents; (2) monitor attendance from the time they are placed in temporary shelter until they are located in a permanent residence; (3) deliver to children and parents appropriate support services of the Board of Education, including tutorial, adult education, counseling and health screening; and (4) establish a computerized data base to track the academic progress of these children and the delivery of educational services.

Support for teen parents is designed to successfully place them in an educational program which could range from equivalency diploma preparation, to Saturday classes for parent and child at a community college, to placement in a regular high school. Many agencies and private groups are involved. Involving the family, often by providing instruction to parents along with the child, serves to impress upon the child the importance of education.

Somehow schools must convince the student that remaining in or returning to school is a more valuable experience than dropping out. To do this, school staff must be actively involved with parents in picking up the pieces for troubled students. Parental involvement has an important place in a prevention program, but special efforts may be needed to get them involved.

Summary

The successful local efforts described in this paper show how necessary it is to coordinate diverse resources so that a problem with educational, social, and economic parts can be attacked on all fronts. In a given community, physical and psychological dropouts are victimized by unique circumstances. The needs those circumstances create, once identified, demand flexible and innovative responses which should be encouraged and financially supported, but not dictated, by the State.

The public schools have a tremendous influence on the lives of children today. With the shifts that have taken place in family life, schools have inherited many responsibilities formerly handled by parents. Although the schools alone cannot provide all of the nurturing and services youngsters require, the schools are logical coordinators of state, community, private, and public agency programs for dropout prevention and return. Part-time employment, day care, food, and clothing may seem non-educational; however, unless students' practical needs are fulfilled, learning and schooling remain low priorities in their lives.

Alternative programs have vast possibilities. They avoid returning a student to the environment which originally caused alienation. More positively, they can bring together innovative program features which offer academic, vocational, and social skills essential for success in the world of work.

As elementary as it may seem, a dropout, per se, is not a problem. A young person may succeed in spite of a decision to drop out. However, a dropout who is ill-prepared to find and keep a job or hold family responsibilities *is* a problem. Schools must keep the objective of preparing students for adult life in mind when exploring programs to suit their students' needs. Particularly in the area of high school equivalency, flexibility in programs should be a high priority. Each school district should be permitted to develop its own equivalency plan, including goals and objectives, student eligibility, staffing, career guidance, methods to measure student progress, and evaluation of program effectiveness.

The middle school years are a high risk time for potential dropouts. Truancy and delinquency peak for both male and female students during this period. Therefore, school districts should look carefully for signals of failure or maladjustment among junior high students; with surprising reliability, the signals predict the act of dropping out at some point during high school. In the long term, however, dropout prevention needs to begin systematically in the early childhood years;

pre-kindergarten programs exemplify the success that can be achieved from early intervention.

The New York State Board of Regents has adopted new, stringent course and diploma requirements. School boards support high-minded goals for education, and they share the Regents' high expectations for students. These expectations, especially in grades 7 and 8, should be balanced by new realities which include a very tight schedule for required courses—reducing the possibility of flexible alternative programs or electives—new standard courses with content which may seem irrelevant to academically marginal students, and widespread confusion at both state and local levels over the meaning and practice of remediation. Steps to implement the Regents Action Plan should be closely monitored, especially in the middle grades. In these crucial grades, the cycle of failure must be broken, not inadvertently strengthened.

As pointed out by Dr. Joan Raymond of Yonkers at the beginning of this paper, funding for alternative programs, let alone new and basic programs demanded by the Regents' plan, is inadequate. Attendance improvement and dropout prevention aid should be increased, and more districts should be made eligible for it. No matter how one defines the term *dropout,* the phenomenon is widespread. The challenge it presents is shared by all organizations and institutions which have the potential to serve children. The public schools are the logical coordinators of the collective response to that challenge.