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AUTHOR Tidwell, Romeria
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ABSTRACT

The goals of this study of early school leavers from 12 Los Angeles high schools were the following: (1) to discover whether the students were true dropouts or whether they were enrolled in some alternative educational program that might lead to a high school diploma; (2) to determine the reasons the students left school before graduating; (3) to explore ways of encouraging students to stay in school until graduation; and (4) to investigate ways of encouraging early leavers to return to high school. Out of a total of 2,401 early school leavers who were contacted, 374 agreed to participate in this study. Two instruments were used: (1) the Cumulative Record Data Summary--designed to obtain demographic information; and (2) the Student Interview--developed to gather information about the student's dropout history, reasons for leaving high school, past and present activities, future plans, and recommendations for improving high schools. The findings revealed that only 39% of the dropouts had returned to an educational program. Many of them complained that school had been "boring" and a waste of time for them, but they said they would encourage others not to drop out. Many in the sample had been low achievers in school, some had numerous home and family responsibilities. Most of the dropouts had attempted to find employment; 29.4% were employed full-time and 21.7% had part-time jobs. Some expressed vague plans to graduate some time in the future. (VM)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
FOLLOW UP OF
EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS
FROM THE LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

PUBLICATION NO. 457



RESEARCH & EVALUATION BRANCH

LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**FOLLOW-UP OF
EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS
From The Los Angeles Unified School District**

by

Rosaria Tidwell, Ph.D

**A Report Prepared for the
Research and Evaluation Branch
Los Angeles Unified School District**

July 1985

LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

**Harry Handler
Superintendent**

APPROVED:

**FLORALINE I. STEVENS
Director**

FOLLOW-UP OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

For young people to complete their formal education has long been a goal of American society. The number of youngsters who enroll in high school has increased from 11% in 1900 to 94% in 1978 (Grant & Eiden, 1980). Success is only relative, however. Recently, increased attention has focused on those young people who prematurely terminate their education -- referred to as school dropouts. Historically, the problem of early school leavers or dropouts has been most prevalent among minority youth, particularly blacks and Hispanics (Rumberger, 1983). However, the dropout problem is not an issue exclusively confined to minority and/or disadvantaged youth. For example, the incidence of early school leavers is increasing among middle-class Anglo youths (Kaeser, 1980; Camp, 1980; and Grant & Eiden, 1980).

It is clear from research that the reasons most frequently given by dropouts, when explaining why they left high school early, include poor school performance, dislike of school, expulsion, a desire to work, financial difficulties, home responsibilities, pregnancy and marriage (Borus, Crowley, Rumberger, Santos, and Shapiro, 1980). The awareness of these factors has assisted researchers and educators in their efforts to reduce dropouts. From available research, it is also known that several significant consequences await those who leave high school prematurely. The costs of dropping out include difficulty in finding employment, being relegated to lower status and lower paying jobs, and having less opportunity for advancement than high school graduates. Dropouts also have lower life-time earnings and are more likely to be the recipients of public assistance and welfare programs (Beck & Muia, 1980).

District-Level Concern for Early School Leavers

Concern for early school leavers (dropouts) also exists at the school district level. The Los Angeles Unified School District, in December 1982, prepared a report which included two summaries. The first consisted of findings, since 1963, which related to the issue of potential early school leavers. The second was a summary of the District's own research since 1965 on early school leavers.

During the last three years the District's Research and Evaluation Branch has used a form, Record of Transfer, to compile information on the number of students who leave the district prior to graduation. Even though this procedure is in place, two important questions remain unanswered. First, are early school leavers truly dropouts? Do early school leavers really check out of school, or do these students instead of enrolling in the high school, attend another less traditional school setting -- such as an adult education school or a local trade school? Second, do early school leavers actually terminate their formal education? Or do early leavers merely not enroll in school after an academic break? Are these "dropouts" those youngsters with high rates of absenteeism? Because these questions cannot be answered adequately, the District now designates students who leave school before graduating as L8 students -- students who are UNKNOWN and DROP.

Purpose of Present Study

The primary purpose of this investigation was to provide current information on issues related to those students labeled as EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS. Four specific questions were addressed:

1. Are early school leavers bona fide school dropouts? (Youngsters who are no longer enrolled in any educational process that might lead to the acquisition of a high school diploma).
2. What are the primary reasons students from the Los Angeles Unified School District, in particular, give for deciding to leave high school before graduating?
3. What might the LAUSD do to retain students until graduation?
4. What might the LAUSD do to return early school leavers to their respective high schools?

In addition to these primary questions, pertinent student demographic information such as marital status, employment histories, and family constellation, was also obtained. Findings of the study can be used to formulate hypotheses and test strategies that ultimately will result in a decrease in the dropout rate. In addition, this information should prove helpful to understanding better the current life styles of students who are true school dropouts.

School Sample

Twelve target schools served as participating schools for this investigation. Six were previously involved in an earlier District study, which focused on non-attendance at the senior high level, (Research and Evaluation Branch, Los Angeles Unified School District (1974). Study of Senior High School Absentees and School Leavers, Report No. 343, Los Angeles, California). The remaining six senior high schools were selected because of their high 'early school leaver' rates. Five geographic regions within the district were represented by the 12 participating senior high schools. A total of 2,401 students from the five regions were contacted and requested to serve as subjects for the study. The number agreeing to participate was 374, 15.6% of the original pool.

Subject Sample

The 374 former senior high school students who served as subjects for this investigation were all students who had left their schools and whose names appeared on the Record of Transfer form (#34-H-136) that the District mandates senior high schools to complete to monitor students who leave before graduating. The names appearing on the Record of Transfer forms submitted to the Research and Evaluation Branch for the 1983-84 academic year served as the pool from which student subjects were selected.

Specifics regarding the student sample are as follows:

1. A somewhat higher proportion of males (N=210, 56.1%) than females (N=164, 43.9%) made up the 374-leaver sample.

2. Nearly one-half of the sample was Hispanic (45.1%). The remaining half were Black and White youngsters with an equal number from the two ethnic groups (25.4% and 25.9%, respectively). The number of American Indian/Alaskan Native and Asian/Pacific Islander participants was substantially low, with this group comprising only 3.6% of the total sample.

Methodology

Research Staff. Pupil Services and Attendance (PSA) workers and relief clerks served as the research staff for this investigation. The PSA participants were personally selected by the Director of Student Adjustment Services. The PSA workers all were full-time employees with the District during the regular academic year. On the other hand, the eight relief clerks were hired by the District specifically to service this particular study. Some had previous part-time employment with the District. Included in the PSA and relief clerk group were persons who spoke both English and Spanish.

The entire research staff participated in a ten-day training package designed to familiarize them with the study's purposes, design, implementation, data collection, and data preparation stages. In addition, because the training was both didactic (i.e., focused on specific content areas) and experiential, staff was required to participate in activities designed to (1) expose them to their assigned tasks; (2) provide them with hands-on experience in completing the data collection instruments; (3) teach them the skills of interpersonal interviewing; and (4) establish procedures for the reporting and synthesizing of data gathered during the implementation of the study.

Procedure

The counselors conducted their leaver interviews during both day and night hours, depending on the availability of the early school leavers.

Instruments. Two major instruments were developed for use in this study:

1. The Cumulative Record Data Summary form was designed to obtain demographic information (such as residence, birthdate, ethnicity, grade placement when left high school and the month of the academic year last attended) about the early school leavers; and
2. Student Interview was developed to gather information about the students' (1) dropout history, (2) reasons for leaving high school, (3) feelings about various aspects of the high school experience, (4) past and present activities, (5) academic and general future plans, (6) reflections about their high schools, and (7) recommendations for the improvement of high schools.

Summary of Results

1. Results: Dropout History. The typical pattern for early school leavers is to complete some portion of the school year rather than to complete a full academic year before dropping out. And, the

earlier months of the calendar year, i.e., January, February and March, reflect the greatest dropout activity. Only 39% of the 374 early school leavers were enrolled in educational institutions at the time of their interviews.

2. Results: Reasons for Leaving School. First, early school leavers comprising this sample were quite clear about which factors did not influence their decisions to leave school prematurely. However, the data indicate there was more uncertainty when asked to give the reasons that were important. The question that comes to mind is, "Would more students return to the system if they were aware and more definite about why they left in the first place?"

With a more direct line of questioning, the early school leavers were better able to focus their thinking and, in turn, give specific reasons for leaving before graduating. From this feedback it appears that "typical" early school leavers (1) are bored with school; (2) find school activities, and classes, a 'waste of time'; (3) are behind with their school credits; (4) make poor grades; and (5) have numerous home and family responsibilities.

3. Results: Reflections of High School Experience. Responses from the leavers interviewed indicate, in general, that the early school leavers held very positive attitudes about education, learning, and the importance of a high school diploma. Ethnic group and gender group analyses reveal, however, that differences do exist within the sample on issues related to the leavers' experiences at the secondary level and the educational values the leavers hold. One example is the Asian/Pacific Islander males who reported "feeling lonely at high school." Their female counterparts did not. Another example can be found with the Black group. The males mentioned being "comfortable when speaking with their school principals"; the females reported feeling "uncomfortable speaking with principals".

A major finding was that the majority of the early school leavers (84.4%) would not recommend to their friends or relatives that they leave high school before graduating. The need to obtain the diploma for job purposes served as the rationale for the leavers' beliefs.

4. Results: Activities and Future Plans. One striking finding that emerged from this study relates to the employment issue. First, the majority of early school leavers (71.5%) had in some way attempted to find employment after leaving their respective high school. However, only about one-third (29.4%) had obtained full-time employment, and nearly one-fourth (21.7%) part-time employment. In spite of these figures, these same leavers were not actively involved in activities that would enable them to exert more control and power over their lives. More often than not, the statements they made were "I plan to" or "I tried to" when describing their past and present behaviors, as related to employment, school attendance, etc. Future plans were also cast in vague terms, such as "I want to get my diploma" or "I want to graduate."

As was previously mentioned, much attention has focused on the dropout or early school leaver. The two phrases that were continually given by the early school leavers were (1) school is boring, and (2) school is a waste-of-time. Direct requests for greater specificity about these phrases resulted in a proliferation of comments that primarily focused on the quality of instruction, the teachers, and the curriculum. Although the youngsters in this study placed a high value on education and learning, they had many complaints about school. What is clear, is that for some of these leavers, there are many difficulties and problems that appeared to exist for them in senior high school.

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