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TEXT: Essential to evaluating a school's holding power, and increasing its ability to keep students until they graduate, is determining how many students drop out, who they are, and why they leave. With this information, schools can knowledgeably develop dropout prevention programs.

The definition of "dropout" varies among school districts, and the mobility of students makes counting dropouts accurately nearly impossible. It is, however, important for all dropout figures to be based on the same set of criteria so an accurate national dropout rate can be determined, and comparisons can be made among different districts in the

country. These comparisons allow for the identification of effective dropout programs that can be replicated elsewhere.

The following core concept can be used by all school districts to define a dropout: A pupil who leaves school, for any reason except death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school or institution.

Within this definition are common categories of students, including those:

--in grades 9 or 10-12 (or in a special ungraded program equivalent to these grades) who leave during the school year and do not return within a specified length of time.

--who do not return to school after a break, summer vacation, or suspension.

--who are runaways or whose whereabouts are unknown.

--who enter the military, a trade or business school, prison, or any other program not qualifying as an elementary or secondary school.

--who are expelled.

Some students are erroneously identified as dropouts. Among the categories of such students are those:

--who drop out before grade 7 or 9, usually under age 16; they are considered truants.

--who leave a traditional public school to continue their education elsewhere (i.e., the Job Corps, a private school, a General Equivalency Diploma program, home-based instruction, early admission to college, a vocational program).

--who leave school but return eventually to either complete their high school education, or earn a GED or other certificate of completion.

Counting dropouts is even more difficult than determining who they are because no system based on student numbers (as are most systems in large school districts), counted at a particular point in time, can correctly reflect the status of every student. Moreover, it is the ability of the staff member inputting data to accurately evaluate every student's status in the face of a great volume of information that ultimately determines the quality of a dropout analysis. While the basis for all dropout rates is the difference between the number of students enrolled at two different points in time, the points chosen by schools vary widely: September and September, September and June, November and June, the beginning term of the school's lowest grade level and that class's normal graduation date.

Some schools are able to take into account students who leave hool but should not be

classified as dropouts (see list above), but others do not have the resources for this elaborate system. Students erroneously counted as dropouts include those on an extended leave while a count is taken, those for whom transfer records should have been received but weren't, those who move so frequently that it is impossible to keep track of them, and those who take longer than normal to graduate.

Often students who eventually drop out have problems from almost the beginning of their school careers. Therefore, it is important to monitor students from the time they enter school so that they can be offered special assistance as soon as a problem is noticed.

Serious academic problems may appear as early as the third grade, and some middle school children (particularly Hispanics) leave school long before the onset of traditional dropout prevention programs. Therefore, some school districts are beginning dropout ention activities at the elementary level. For example, in Kansas City, MO, incoming seventh graders with poor attendance records are placed in Student Support Groups that meet weekly and provide extra encouragement. A Transitional Skills Class for Dade County, FL, students in grades 1 through 6 offers a high concentration of instruction in the students' deficient areas by a teacher and aide team; in its first year of operation, 85% of the program students improved their basic skills.

The ninth grade is a particularly difficult time for at risk students, for they are both at a critical stage of adolescence, and facing a new, impersonal, and more challenging school. To offset the problems for at risk ninth graders, schools can assign more experienced teachers to them who will be sensitive to their needs, can shift some difficult required courses to later years, can provide extra counseling services, and can work with parents to ease the transition.

Crucial to identifying at risk students and helping them progress through school is monitoring the various aspects of their performance:

--Attendance: Since poor attendance often foreshadows dropping out, personal attention from the school is needed at the first sign of excessive absenteeism.

--Testing: Use of new sensitive testing devices can identify students' learning strengths and weaknesses so that compensatory measures can be taken early.

--Educational history: Maintaining comprehensive academic profiles of students can facilitate their placement in proper compensatory programs based on their past experience, and can facilitate appropriate placement in new schools of transferees.

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