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AUTHOR   Catterall, James S.
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ABSTRACT
        In the issue-attention cycle identified by political
scientists, the imagination and energy of public leaders progress
from alarmed discovery of a problem, to euphoric resource
mobilization and a search for solutions, to institutionalization of
responses. Next come the harsh realities of expensive answers and
slow progress, causing a hasty retreat and an attention shift to the
latest hot issue fueled by yet another alarmed discovery. According
to this paper, the dropout issue is basking in the early, hopeful
stages of the cycle. The paper describes the alarmed attention
currently focused on school dropouts and outlines what is known about
attempts to prevent early school leaving. Most citizens find current
dropout rates, especially for urban schools, shocking. Other factors
bringing the dropout issue to national prominence include the
standards-raising movement's effects on student persistence, the
unsatisfactory collection and reporting of dropout statistics, lack
of progress in equalizing educational opportunity, and growing
concern over the nation's competitiveness and labor force quality.
Research has successfully described the dropout phenomenon, but has
failed to prescribe either a concrete program or conditional sets of
activities to combat the problem. Known factors concerning family
background, academic ability and performance, social integration,
early adult transitions, and the consequences of dropping out are
briefly discussed. Implications for dropout prevention are also
explored, along with the need to extend the public's attention span
and tap community networks. Some resources, with names, addresses,
and telephone numbers are provided. (MLH)

POLICY

ISSUES

School Dropouts:
Policy Prospects

by James S. Catterall
University of California at Los
Angeles

November 1986

Prepared by:
POLICY AND PLANNING CENTER
Appalachia Educational Laboratory
P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325

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James S. Catterall
University of California at Los Angeles

Policy and Planning Center
Appalachia Educational Laboratory
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Charleston, West Virginia 25325

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Introduction

Political scientists have identified a principle of public attention to social problems that bears a timely message for the growing core of Americans concerned about school dropouts. The principle is called the Issue Attention Cycle. In the cycle, the imagination and energy of public leaders progress from alarmed discovery of a problem, to euphoric mobilization of resources and a search for solutions, to institution-alization of responses. Then, the harsh realities of expensive answers and slow progress come home to roost, causing a hasty retreat and a wholesale shift of attention to the newest hot issue to be fueled by yet another alarmed discovery.

The perspectives on school dropout policy set out in this discussion illustrate that the issue of dropouts is basking in the early, hopeful stages of this cycle. Whether meaningful progress results from the issue's ascendence will depend on the actions of all who care, including educators, employers, legislators, policy researchers, parents, and students themselves. In short, I argue that there are two dropout problems in the United States—one is the troublesome incidence of school leaving, and the other is the challenge of doing something to improve things.

In this policy perspective, I describe the alarmed attention currently focused on school dropouts, and then sketch what we know about the numerous attempts that have been launched to combat early school leaving. The dimensions of the problem are important to understand and

communicate, because they can be very motivating for both educators and citizens. Awareness of current activities and thought about what works is also important, because having an arsenal of possible strategies in mind is a prerequisite to taking action.

We know that dropping out affects large numbers of youngsters. The thought of doing something that will bring large-scale changes in current patterns is a staggering prospect. It would involve an unprecedented and daunting reordering of educational and social priorities. But while we know le s than we would like to know about dropout prevention, we know enough to initiate progress--and if progress does not start somewhere, it does not start at all. Our knowledge base is likely to improve greatly in the next few years, because a host of programs across the nation are in motion. Most of these programs are aware (at the request of their funders, at least) of the need to document their results. References to several programs that have attracted attention are provided below.

Alarmed Discovery

School dropouts have become the object of alarmed attention. The current concerns about school dropouts are fueled by several factors: the apparent extent of dropping out, the problems of the dropout in an era of increased academic standards in American schools, the sketchiness of available data, the continued disadvantages of particular minorities shown in dropout data, and deepening concerns about the quality of the American labor force and our competitive position in the world economy.

Disturbing Statistics

Published dropout rates surprise just about everyone and most particularly the citizen who is only passingly familiar with current trends and issues in education. Americans hold deep-seated beliefs in the value of education, and we have come to consider the completion of high school to be the barest minimum preparation for adult life. The numbers shown in the following table are typical of those brought into current discussions of school dropouts. They are usually interpreted as evidence of a profound educational shortfall:

Table 1

Commonly Reported Dropout Statistics

National 9th Grade Attrition Rate, 1984:   29%

Typical Dropout Rates		
	Large Urban Schools:	40-45%
	Problem Urban Schools:	55-65%
	Problem Appalachian Counties:	48%

AEL States:	Attrition Rate 1984	Young Adults, 18-24 Without Diplomas
Kentucky	32%	38%
Tennessee	30%	30%
Virginia	25%	38%
West Virginia	27%	27%

We frequently hear that more than a fourth of our kids drop out of school and that this problem is nearly doubled in many urban centers. It is also reported that the 13 Appalachian states have dropout rates higher than the national average and that particular Appalachian counties have rates one and a half to two times the national average. These statistics alarm anyone who regards high school as a universal part of growing up in America.

The Standards-Raising Movement

Available evidence, although sketchy, suggests that youth have dropped out at today's rates for the past two decades and that this plateau was preceded by steady increases in school completion since the turn of the century. So the current alarm is not a response to an aggravated condition. It seems rather a view of dropout behavior recast by a new context--particularly a nation focused on legislating academic orientations for its elementary and secondary schools. The efforts of many state school systems and local districts to increase requirements for high school diplomas--such as added courses, more classes in academic subjects, and more rigorous course content--have raised concerns over the ability of many youngsters to clear the new hurdles. This question alone seems to have generated considerable interest in gathering and analyzing school dropout statistics. It has clearly propelled dropout data to the nation's headlines.

Unsatisfactory Data

The scramble for information on dropouts has yielded a unanimous verdict that we do not do a very good job of collecting and reporting dropout statistics. There are a lot of reasons for this, including the high geographical mobility of students and their families, the understandable unwillingness of schools to incur the high costs of tracking students once they leave school, the numerous definitional issues that are resolved individually and idiosyncratically by states and school districts, the fuzziness and intermittent nature of Census Bureau data on the topic, and so on. What available statistics do suggest--

rightly, given their total mass and general agreement--is that dropping
out affects sizeable numbers and shares of our youth. We are also left
with a concern that any results of efforts to do something about early
school leaving may go undetected by existing and faulty data
collection mechanisms.

Unfair Disadvantages

Interacting with current academic reforms and the related concerns
over dropping out is the reinforcement of a long held disappointment in
American schooling provided by dropout statistics. Our interests in
equalizing educational opportunity have underwritten many efforts to
extend extra resources and educational attention to America's poor and
ethnic minorities. Continuing studies of school dropouts remind us that
we have not made overwhelming progress on such fronts. The incidence of
dropping out is consistently found to relate inversely to student
socioeconomic background. We also know that dropout rates of American
blacks are roughly double those of whites, and dropout rates of Hispanics
are even higher than those of blacks. Various champions of the interests
of disadvantaged children are seizing dropout statistics nowadays to
bolster their claims for a larger slice of the educational pie.

American Competitiveness

A final circumstance that brings dropout issues to national
prominence is the growing concern over the quality of the American labor
force and the ability of American corporations to compete successfully
with foreign companies both at home and abroad. One educational

implication is the need to cultivate technological expertise—an issue addressed in the general standards-raising movement where science and mathematics hold a revered position. Another is the employability and productivity of the citizenry more generally—are youngsters leaving school with enough fundamental skills and trainability to meet the needs of American business? Here, the basic preparation of the school dropout is called into question, and many fear that too many dropouts bring too little to the American workplace. Dropouts are either unemployable because of basic skill or attitude deficits, or they simply cost employers too much to train for available jobs, since their learning skills are underdeveloped.

Mobilization of Resources

The dropout alarm has thus sounded and it continues to knell. The issue has also progressed to the second phase of the attention cycle—the search for solutions and the mobilization of resources. These endeavors have taken the form of added research and analysis, numerous public task forces established to assemble information and debate strategies, legislative adoption of pilot and demonstration programs, major foundation support for analyses and program trials, and regional and nationwide attempts to build networks for the exchange of information. One testimonial to this is the Appalachia Educational Laboratory's sponsorship of this policy perspective on school dropouts.

In the remainder of the paper, let's review what we seem to have learned from accumulated research and trials, where we still have a ways

to go, and what resources seem to be accumulating, both in the
Appalachian Region and nationally, that can be of general benefit to
educators and policymakers.

Lessons From Research

Research has done a better job of describing the dropout
phenomenon--who drops out, when, with what stated reasons, with what
immediate and long-term consequences--than it has of prescribing either a
concrete program or conditional sets of activities that educators or
citizens can enlist to combat the problem. Prescriptions for policy are
grounded on what research concludes about dropouts. But for many
reasons, including the limitations of existing research and the
complexity of the problem, prescriptions do not unambiguously follow from
research findings. Research has tied school completion and dropping out
rather firmly to pupil family background; academic ability and
performance; social integration with the life of the school; and certain
early transitions to adult roles, particularly work and childbearing.
Research has also identified substantial economic and social consequences
of dropping out, both for the individual and society.

Family background. The association of dropping out with family
socioeconomic background parallels the well documented importance of
family background for educational achievement and attainment more
generally. Large scale, longitudinal studies have provided the best
information on this question (and for many dropout related questions).
Data from the Project Talent study in the early 1960s showed that more
than . both male and female dropouts came from families in the

bottom socioeconomic quartile. In the recent High School and Beyond survey, dropout rates between the sophomore and senior years were more than 25 percent for low SES youngsters, about 13 percent for those in the middle of the range, and less than 8 percent for high SES youngsters.

A finer examination of parent-child relationships has been conducted by some researchers, with results that are more important for dropout prevention than acknowledgements of general associations with socioeconomic status. High School and Beyond analysts report that actual parent practices supporting education, such as providing an environment suited to studying, active monitoring of children's activities, and devoting time to children for discussing their experiences, are associated with lower incidence of dropping out of school. This important research helps to explain differences of achievement and dropout rates within groups of similar families, and suggests certain prescriptions for families concerned about the educational fortunes of their children.

Higher dropout rates are also commonly reported for black and Hispanic-surnamed Americans. But detailed analyses of at least two of the national surveys have reached an interesting refinement of this well-known conclusion. When family economic status is held constant, the dropout rates of blacks and Hispanics are no different from those of whites. In High School and Beyond, black and Hispanic dropout rates were even lower than those of whites, once family income was controlled.

An important conclusion seems to be that although family background is an overriding measured factor in achievement and attainment studies,

it is specific family practices that may underlie the relationship. The latter are amenable to intervention and change; the former is not.

Academic ability and performance. Dropping out is unquestionably more likely for those who show lower academic ability on standardized tests and who achieve lower grades in school. About half of those maintaining D averages or lower typically drop out, a fraction that diminishes steadily with increasing grade performance. The chances of dropping out are also substantially higher for those who are held back in an early grade. Low academic performance has shown up as the most significant predictor of school dropout in studies that have compared academic with other factors in controlled designs. But the fact that (as in High School and Beyond) nearly one tenth of those sophomores with B averages and almost 3 percent of those who report earning A's drop out reminds us that dropping out is not strictly an academic phenomenon.

Social integration. Dissatisfaction, negative attitudes, and anti-social behavior are common among those who subsequently drop out. Eventual dropouts tend to be absent and truant from school more frequently, more entangled in school disciplinary proceedings, more frequently suspended, and in more trouble with the law. They express less interest in school, feel they are held in less esteem than others, and feel less positively about themselves. They also report that their friends are less participating, less interested, less successful, and less inclined toward college. Low participation in extracurricular activities is also reported by those who eventually drop out.

Given what we know about the academic deficits of eventual dropouts as a group, it is not surprising that negative attitudes about school

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prevail. Unfortunately, we lack analyses that help us to sort adequately among an important set of questions: does the apparent lack of social integration of the eventual dropout result from low academic success, does poor school work lead to social disaffection, do academic and social deficits fuel each other, and what independently contributes to each? And finally, are these processes different for different youngsters and in different circumstances?

Early adult transitions. Finding and pursuing work and forming families are adult roles that are frequently adopted by youngsters still in school. We know from High School and Beyond survey data that nearly half of those in high school work at a job, with slightly more eventual dropouts than eventual finishers engaging in paid work. Research has also documented the increased dropout propensity for those who work excessive hours, beyond 15 or 20 hours per week. Our knowledge of the relationships between working and dropping out has gaps similar to those revealed above for general social integration. We do not know if work outside of school is a response to disaffection with school or if schoolwork suffers as a result of excessive work involvement. A good guess is that both occur.

Child-bearing and early marriage are implicated in some dropping out, by the self-reports of dropouts in national surveys. More than 40 percent of black female dropouts cite pregnancy as a reason for leaving school in the Survey of Youth and Labor Market experience. Fifteen percent of Hispanics and 14 percent of white females cite this reason. Between 20 and 30 percent of High School and Beyond female dropouts cited

pregnancy as a reason for leaving school. Marriage plans are claimed by 5 to 10 percent of males and 15 to 36 percent of females. As in the case of early work choices, we do not know much about the causal ordering of dropout intentions and pregnancy or marriage plans.

Consequences of dropping out. Several studies have documented the costs to individuals and society associated with undereducation and dropping out. A recent study is cited in the references below. Dropouts work at lower paying jobs, are more frequently unemployed, and are more likely to need various public services such as welfare and health. Dropouts are also disproportionately involved with crime and its associated costs. Both the individual and society appear to lose, and strong arguments for public attention to dropouts emerge in cost analyses.

Implications for Dropout Prevention

Research on school dropouts provides some basic underpinnings of thought and action on dropout prevention, but that research has not led to precise program prescriptions. Most analyses have focused on student attributes, behaviors, and attitudes, and not nearly enough on what schools, parents, and significant others in the lives of adolescents do that tends to aggravate conditions associated with leaving school. The literature has certainly neglected what concerned individuals or institutions can do to ameliorate the problem. Specific program evaluation efforts are surprisingly few and far between when it comes to dropout prevention and recovery programs.

A great deal of information on model or exemplary dropout prevention programs is becoming available. But a fine-grained examination of even

the latest materials yields very little documentation of results--such as improved dropout rates in comparison to well chosen control groups, or before and after measures on important attitude, self-perception, and performance variables. This does not mean necessarily that programs are not working--it reflects chiefly the difficulty and expense of mounting these types of evaluations.

We can state with confidence some general observations and conclusions as we survey the state of dropout prevention:

1. Different programs are aimed at specific target populations of would-be or actual dropouts.

2. Several core approaches to the dropout problem exist. One or more of which is found in most dropout prevention activities.

3. The selection of an appopriate intervention should be based on the problems or barriers evidenced by the intended beneficiaries, i.e., on the conditions facing a particular target group.

4. A number of programs have gained widespread attention, sometimes on the basis of promising inital results, but more often in response to the enthusiasm of their sponsors and participants, or because of their novel collaborative support arrangements.

Core target populations. In addition to displaying some common strategies, dropout prevention programs often identify a specific group or groups needing assistance, usually one of these:

1. The student in academic or social difficulty who still shows an interest in school--frequently the late elementary or junior high schooler.

2. The student who is showing distinct signs of alienation and leaving school through excessive absence or truancy.

3. The student with a specific impediment to school continuation, such as having a child or needing to work to support a family.

4. The student who has already dropped out.

Core dropout prevention approaches. The themes that dominate dropout prevention efforts can be grouped along the following lines. Programs may exhibit one or more of these:

1. Early identification and help for potential dropouts;

2. Focus on academic deficits through remediation;

3. Focus on negative attitudes, goals, and self-concepts through counseling;

4. Focus on the connections between school and work; and

5. Focus on a broad spectrum of problems.

Let's turn now to what we are learning about each of these core strategies--who is served, and what issues face the sponsors of dropout prevention efforts employing each.

Early identification. Dale Mann calls them red flags. Some pilot programs call them early warning signals. By any name, a long list of pupil characteristics and behaviors associated with increased odds of dropping out can be culled from accumulated research. The eighth grader who has been held back in an early grade, has a D average or worse, reads two or more years behind grade level, is absent frequently, has been suspended, is working 20 hours per week, and who oogles at passing infants has an overwhelming collection of strikes against the chances of finishing school. He or she will probably not even show up for the ninth grade.

Early identification of the potential dropout is an enticing prospect for educators--it is decidely important in reaching the early struggler before thoughts of leaving school begin to form. Many of the

developmental deficiencies of typical dropouts described in the research have their roots in much earlier academic or social problems. And high school teachers and counselors frequently lament the difficulties of treating the dropout-prone once they show signs of disaffection and leaving. Early identification and remediation is a natural response.

But early identification is not without its hazards. Studies amassing early behavior and performance data reveal the imprecision of predicting just who will and who will not eventually drop out. The red flags are defined by central tendencies for which there are numerous exceptions. The obvious and problematic danger is that students who are no such thing will be labeled and treated as potential dropouts, and particularly that they will be confronted with low expectations for school performance. "Candidate in need of extra attention" would probably serve more productively as a title until such time as the student acknowledges doubts about finishing school. This determination seems to fall in the province of the observant teacher, counselor, or parent.

Academic focus. I have asserted that no one problem or cause can be tied to dropping out of school, but a suggestion of accumulated research is that there are some fairly predominant ones. Researchers and educators alike would probably agree that the largest proximate cause of dropping out is academic difficulty. If one were allowed a single piece of information about a ninth grader and wanted to predict dropping out, he could do no better than to know the student's grades. Academics are at the core of the school, at least in theory. And those who do poorly

are made to feel it in a variety of ways that can make school an unpleasant place to be—such as the in-class embarrassment of not knowing answers or failing tests or reading poorly aloud.

Because of the central importance of academics among the goals of the school, and because of its centrality in the problems of many dropouts, numerous dropout prevention efforts focus on academic training. Even non-academic focused programs, such as work-related interventions, have been shown to contribute little to actual school completion unless they build in attention to needed education success skills. And if academic standards are indeed raised for all students as a result of current education reforms, the need for academic interventions is certain to expand.

A recent survey of school leaver reports in the 13 state Appalachian Region (by the Research Triangle Institute) indicated that poor academics or related reasons were cited in 60 percent of dropout cases. Financial reasons came in a distant second, cited for only 14 percent of dropouts. In the same survey, academic focused programs—alternate curricula or tutorials—were claimed to be features of about 38 percent of reported dropout prevention programs.

Counseling focus. Recognizing the importance of academics and creating change for kids in academic trouble are two different things. To many observing educators, a variety of pressing problems interfere with the adolescent's capacity for academic achievement and simply must be treated simultaneously, if not first. The evident lack of social integration of many eventual dropouts—disciplinary entanglements,

strained relationships with teachers and peers, apparent low regard for themselves as individuals and for the value of education, low academic aspirations, and unformulated goals for adult life—are all seen as critical stumbling blocks. Counseling interventions sometimes take a primary place in the dropout prevention arsenal because of the primacy these problems can have in the life of the adolescent. The 13 state survey also indicated that a fourth of dropout prevention efforts centered on counseling activities (self-awareness, self-esteem, interpersonal relations, understanding available options, and the consequences of school and life decisions) and that an additional 8 percent focused specifically on attitudes and self-awareness.

Schooling and work focus. We know that many high school students work at part-time jobs, dropouts and finishers alike. One answer to student disaffection with school has been to emphasize the work-relatedness of school experiences by connecting the two through vocation-oriented curricula. There is a wide range of ways that this is achieved—traditional vocational classes, integrated specialized vocational training sequences, school-based enterprises, and work-study arrangements with off-campus employers. Gary Wehlage, in an analysis available through Phi Delta Kappa's Fastback education series, describes several promising Wisconsin programs for the marginal high school student. And a number of recently initiated dropout prevention efforts involve creative partnerships between local businesses—sources of work and training experiences—and the schools.

Broad spectrum programs. I have described the dropout phenomenon as

complex, which it certainly is. Programs have evolved which recognize this complexity, even in the lives of single teenagers. These programs address the whole child--academic skill building, desires to connect academics to something tangible like a job, self-esteem, problems generated at home such as neglect or abuse, problems with illegal drugs and alcohol. These programs combine vocational with academic curricula and have a strong counseling component with one-on-one adult/student attention. In sum, they provide elements of all of the program foci described above.

A model comprehensive dropout prevention program has been developed by educators at the Center for Effective Secondary Schools at the University of Wisconsin. Preliminary results obtained over the past three years at nine different school sites adopting the model program are very encouraging. At-risk students seem to stay in school and to show gains on some important attitude and self-perceptions, such as self-esteem, social bonding to peers and teachers, and perceived opportunity in life. Along with the model program, the center and collaborating researchers (myself among them) are refining instruments to be used in evaluating the effects of dropout prevention programs. These instruments and reports based on their use are available to interested programs through the center (see references below).

Extending the Attention Cycle

I began by noting the ascendance of the school dropout issue in the United States and the enthusiastic mobilization of information and

resources around it. The balance of the issue attention cycle has yet to

unfold, and the activities of educators and citizens will help determine

how much progress is made while the sun shines on school leavers. A

contention of this discussion is that information about the extent and

consequences of dropping out, along with good information about effective

strategies, are essential motivators to public action. The willingness

of individuals to champion the dropout issue and the willingness of

decisionmakers to devote real resources to it are looming and crucial

choice points.

The dominant quality of the world of dropout prevention and recovery

in 1987 is diversity--diverse program structures and goals addressing a

diverse range of student needs with diverse patterns of sponsorship in

the schools and their surrounding communities. The only genuinely common

ingredient that stands out in available information regarding successful

or promising programs is the presence of a caring individual or group of

sponsors at the center of things--the teacher, counselor, principal,

business leader. Addressing the problems of dropouts is probably like

almost any endeavor in the schools or elsewhere--if someone cares enough,

things can and will happen. The power of entrepreneurship cannot be

overestimated.

The needs for local program-building and the hazards of central

mandates are most apparent in the case of school dropouts. States are

moving to place dropout prevention on the agenda of schools. What should

be done is best determined at a local level where specific problems are

known, where available and possible resources can be identified, and

where the conveyors of assistance are energized by a sense of program
ownership. Sensible central policies for dropout prevention and
recovery--issuing from large district and county offices or state
legislatures--must recognize that entrepreneurship cannot be legislated;
it must be facilitated. The prescription appears to include
substantive resources, technical assistance, and helpful information.

Tapping the Networks

The dropout entrepreneur can benefit these days from a small
explosion of information on dropout prevention programs. To the
advantage of would-be dropout preventers, descriptions of model programs
abound, and a convenient taxonomy of service models and target
populations sketched above is helping to organize much of what is
available. To the chagrin of educators and policymakers, there is little
hard evaluative evidence on dropout prevention models thus far--the
apparent reasons being that scarce resources are devoted to service
delivery instead of the rather demanding designs needed for competent
evaluations in this domain. The multiple goals and program structures
characterizing the dropout prevention field also hinder systematic and
comparable evaluation.

Nonetheless, an informal set of nominating processes has elevated a
variety of programs to national and regional attention. Many programs
have attracted a spotlight because the people engaged in them are excited
about what is going on. This is certainly a good place to begin. A few
references to specific activities were made in the text above. Where to

follow up on these programs, and additional recommended information

sources are provided below.

Resources

A few references to specific activities were made in the text above.
Where to followup on these programs, and additional recommended
information sources are provided below.

Source	Resource
National Center on Effective Secondary Schools School of Education University of Wisconsin Madison, WI 53706	* Model Comprehensive Program * Evaluation Instrument
Research Triangle Institute P. O. Box 12194 Research Traingle Park, North Carolina 27709	* "High School Dropout in Appalachia: Problems and Palliatives." by J. L. Cox and R. Spivey, 1986
Appalachian Regional Commission 1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Washington, D. C. 20235	* $2.2 million in recently funded dropout projects
70001, Ltd. 600 West Sixth Avenue, SW Suite 300 Washington, D. C. 20024	* More than 50 projects in 16 states. Work skills, GED training
SEEDCO 130 West 42nd Street New York, New York 10036	* Report to the Carnegie Corporation, "What Do We Do About Youth Dropouts? A Sourcebook of Solutions." (in print, December 1986)
James S. Catterall (author) UCLA Graduate School of Education Los Angeles, California 90024	* Sample Evaluation "On the Social Costs of Dropping Out of School." 1986

Source	Resource
National Foundation for the Improvement of Education 1201 16th Street, NW Washington, D. C. 20036	* "A Blueprint for Success." Report of nationwide collaboration on dropout prevention principles and strategies. Includes numerous references to organization activities and information exchanges

Program contacts in the state departments of education in the AEL

Region are as follows:

State Department of Education	Contact
Kentucky Department of Education	David Jackson, 502/564-4770
Tennessee Department of Education	Paula Brauchle, 615/751-0725
Virginia Department of Education	Richard Levy, 804/225-2050
West Virginia Department of Education	Terri Wilson, 304/348-7826