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ABSTRACT

A 3.5-year study of dropout prevention programs in New York City public schools shows that current programs have been effective in increasing professional and public awareness of the dropout problem and providing needed support to some students. However, the categorical approach of most programs is inadequate, providing special services to only a limited number of students under a rigid format for a limited time. It slights the needs both of the students reached, and the vastly larger population of students in the same and other schools who are truant, or at-risk of becoming so. Moreover, the approach does not address the problem of school environments that are personally alienating and academically ineffectual, and which counteract the effects of the special programs. The programs studied are funded by the New York State Attendance Improvement/Dropout Prevention Program (AIDP), and the New York City Dropout Prevention Program (DPP). Project staff made observation visits to 11 middle and 9 high schools, and conducted structured interviews with students, staff, and administrators on all levels between 1985 and 1987. A comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of the various programs resulted in the recommendation that funding and program policy incorporate a systemic approach, characterized by the involvement of school staff in solving negative schoolwide conditions. A list of references and six appendices containing descriptions of the AIDP and DPP programs and schools are included. (Author/FMW)

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EFFECTIVE DROPOUT PREVENTION

The Case for Schoolwide Reform

A report of the
**PUBLIC EDUCATION
ASSOCIATION**

by Diana Oxley, Ph.D.,
Project Director

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EFFECTIVE DROPOUT PREVENTION THE CASE FOR SCHOOLWIDE REFORM

MAY 1988

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Secondly, we are indebted to the students we interviewed for sharing their school experience with us.

We thank the many district, borough, and central board administrators and staff of the New York City Board of Education, staff of community-based organizations, staff of the Assembly Education Committee, and the Office of the Mayor for fulfilling our requests for information. We have endeavored to use it to produce a fair and complete report on dropout prevention programs. We hope that it serves as a constructive instrument of program improvement for policymakers and program administrators.

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Diana Oxley, Ph.D.

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report is based in general on research and observation of the schools from the inception of the State Attendance Improvement/Dropout Prevention initiative and in particular on a two-year research project conducted during 1985-86 and 1986-87. During the first year of the study, project staff visited eight middle and nine high schools; extensive structured interviews with the principal, program facilitator, school and CBO-based staff from all major personnel categories, and students were conducted in Winter 1985. In the second year, project staff visited three additional middle schools to increase the representativeness of the sample given the much larger number of schools involved in the dropout prevention initiative at the middle school level; and returned to four of the same high schools which had been included in the first year's sample. The interviews with staff and students were carried out in Winter and Spring 1987. The schools involved in both years' study represented a mix of AIDP and DPP programs and models at both middle and high school levels. During the second year, project staff also interviewed dropout prevention program administrators and staff located in district, borough, and central board offices in order to broaden our understanding of the implementation of central program policy.

The analysis of school-level need relied on AFDC data made available by the New York City Board of Education, Office of Student Information Services.

INTRODUCTION

Thirty-six New York City high schools and 98 junior high schools have been singled out for a special assault on their seemingly intractable dropout rates. With a majority of the student population from families in poverty, the schools' profiles predict failure and indeed students drop out of these schools at a greater than average rate. To reverse this failure, in 1984 Assembly Member Jose Serrano, Chair of the New York State Assembly Education Committee, created the Attendance Improvement/Dropout Prevention Program at a cost of \$28 million (\$22.5 million for New York City) which the Legislature has expanded to its current \$37 million (\$30 million for New York City). In 1985, New York City Mayor Edward I. Koch added \$10 million (continued to date) for an additional effort known as the Dropout Prevention Program. Together these programs present a dropout prevention effort of unprecedented scope in New York City.

In the three-and-one-half years that the Public Education Association (PEA) has studied these dropout prevention initiatives and interacted with legislative, municipal, and education officials, we have documented policymakers' willingness to confront the reasons why students leave school and what needs to change to enable students to stay in school. However, we have found shortcomings in funding availability and allocation, program scope, and implementation. The New York City Board of Education, which is responsible for developing program guidelines and administration for both the state and city initiated programs, has been responsive to PEA's recommendations aimed at strengthening dropout prevention efforts, yet the implementation of these recommendations has not been without flaws.

Originally in 1984, for instance, funding was spread thinly over all schools — even if schools did not exhibit a grave dropout problem they received funding. A response to PEA concerns, implemented in the 1985-86 school year, targeted a limited number of schools and students within schools for intensive support. However, this corrective action brought with it a standardized program format insensitive to local conditions and the differing needs of targeted students. Similarly, PEA's recommendation to strengthen academics was implemented through self-contained classes which tended to label and isolate students. Indeed, PEA's persistent highlighting of implementation difficulties, as well as public demands for accountability, typically were translated into overly prescriptive guidelines and circumscription of programs. As a result, most dropout prevention efforts in New York City have been too limited to meet individual or citywide needs.

The findings and policy recommendations contained in this report are the product of PEA's several years' experience with dropout prevention initiatives and specifically draw upon our 1985-87 study of how the schools responded to the mandate to increase attendance and stem the dropout rate.

PEA's overall finding is that the current dropout prevention efforts have been effective in increasing professional and public awareness of the dropout problem and providing needed support to some students. However, the current approach of most programs is inadequate, providing special services to only a limited number of students under a rigid format for a limited time. It slights the needs both of the students reached and the vastly larger population of students in the same and other schools who are truant or at-risk of becoming so. Moreover, the approach does not address the problem of school

environments that are personally alienating and academically ineffectual and which countermand the effect of special supports.

PEA has therefore concluded that dropout prevention funding and policy must integrate the provision of social supports with bottom-up school reform strategies that address the endemic problems of the school. This approach, which we have called "systemic", allows the schools to institute reforms intended to benefit the school as a whole and, using the needs of the individual school as the guide, reorder the institution to help solve the educational problems students present. Under the systemic approach, staff is challenged to take on the school's standard operating procedures and negative schoolwide conditions, e.g., by reorganizing the school day with a P.M. School or placing students in small clusters to reduce anonymity. We found the potential of this systemic approach to have been validated in a number of the dropout prevention efforts which used an enriching mix of targeted attendance outreach and monitoring and more sweeping program reforms for an integrated, comprehensive, and collegially planned program. We are recommending that this approach be extended immediately to more of the schools currently with only the AIDP Program and ultimately to all the schools in the system.

In the report that follows, Chapters One and Two compare the various models of dropout prevention programs, the extent to which they meet current needs, and their administration. Chapters Three, Four, and Five examine program dimensions of particular interest: attendance, job programs, and parent involvement. Recommendations for immediate action follow each chapter.

CHAPTER ONE

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF CURRENT DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS

OVERVIEW

The New York City Board of Education's predominant strategy for reducing the city's high rate of student attrition was to create programs which we have termed for convenience "categorical." Collectively these programs are state funded, administered centrally from the chancellor's office and are called Attendance Improvement/Dropout Prevention (AIDP); 124 of the 134 middle and high schools in the state funded dropout prevention initiative implemented such programs. Eligible schools were those, with some exceptions, whose attendance rates were below the city median. The programs served on the average 100 to 150 students per school who met set criteria.

Middle school dropout prevention programs were set up in 98 schools or 55% of the 179 middle schools in the city. The number of students targeted in these schools was 14,700; this number represents 14% of the 106,000 students enrolled in these 98 schools and 8% of the total middle school population of 183,600.

In these schools, dropout prevention originally provided augmented support services such as counseling and attendance monitoring and after school enrichment activities. No more than 150 students in the upper two grades (7th to 8th or 8th to 9th depending on the school) could be targeted for services. In the current year, middle school programs have been redesigned to provide an alternative academic component patterned after high school programs already in operation.

High school dropout prevention programs were implemented in 36 or 32% of the 110 city high schools. Targeted high school students totaled 10,200; they constituted 10% of the 104,700 students enrolled in these schools and 4% of the city's total high school enrollment of 262,000.

Across high schools, the size of the program varied according to funding source. In state funded programs, target groups of 150 students (with some exceptions) in the ninth and tenth grades received support services and, in addition, were placed in a specially designed academic program.

In ten high schools which participated in a joint Board of Education/ city-sponsored "laboratory" program, schoolwide or "systemic" improvements were pursued in addition to the provision of special services to targeted individuals. Each of these Dropout Prevention Programs (DPP) directed support services to target groups whose number corresponded to the number of students who drop out in a year

in each school. The number ranged from 177 to 798. These programs also included reforms which were intended to benefit the school as a whole, although most of these systemic reforms were instituted at the first two grade levels. These schools had much larger budgets to support their expanded agenda. The participating schools were selected from among those with the poorest records of attendance and achievement in the city.

It is extremely important to understand the limitations as well as strengths of a systemic approach — just as it is important to recognize the bounds of categorical programs. A cautious appraisal of systemic intervention and a similar look at categorical programs will help to establish realistic expectations for school progress and to avoid unfair penalization of schools for failing to achieve goals which are not commensurate with the schools' capacity.

SYSTEMIC AND CATEGORICAL PROGRAMS COMPARED

CATEGORICAL PROGRAMS IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOLS

At the middle school level, state and city funded programs function under the same guidelines. They are categorical programs available to 150 students per school. The criteria most frequently applied stipulated a range of absences above or below which students were deemed ineligible. Emphasis is placed on counseling, attendance monitoring, after school enrichment activities, and an alternative academic component. A part time guidance counselor or less expensive full time SAPIS worker (Substance Abuse Prevention Intervention Services) was assigned to the program. Counselors monitored student progress, met with families when necessary, and were responsible for organizing activities for parents to increase their support of program efforts. Two full time paraprofessionals or the equivalent part time attendance teacher and full time paraprofessional were allocated to carry out attendance monitoring and outreach.

The academic component was confined to two periods a week of in-class instruction in career education and an after school program. Due to teachers' widespread dissatisfaction with the career education curriculum and the fact that students were removed from their regular classes to receive instruction, these classes were eliminated in the 1987-88 year.

The after school program could take one of two forms: extended-day classes encompassing tutoring in core courses and recreational activities or career education which included in-school business enterprises and paid work experience. Program guidelines specified that activities were to be organized in two-hour sessions for 2 to 3 days a week. Up to five teachers, each working with 15 students could be hired; generally far fewer teachers were actually employed, however. Consequently, only a fraction of targeted students participated in the after school program, and attendance by these students was often quite poor. In the current 1987-88 year, a school day academic program supported with funding from other sources has been added.

Funding

Sixty-nine of the 98 middle school dropout prevention programs were funded through AIDP; the remaining 29 were supported by city DPP funding. Both AIDP and DPP programs received the same amount, \$150,000 per school program. Despite the difference in funding source, both AIDP and DPP programs followed the same general model, with one exception: CBO staff were used to provide certain services in several AIDP schools and to operate entire programs in 14 of the 29 schools. Roughly equal numbers of the DPP schools were designated for CBO programs and for school-based programs to permit a comparison of their relative effectiveness. In schools with CBO programs, the CBO received \$100,000 and the school received \$50,000 to carry out supplementary activities.

CATEGORICAL PROGRAMS IN THE HIGH SCHOOLS

Categorical high school programs followed one of three models: a blocked academic program with intensified support services called SOAR; a locally adapted version of SOAR called Strategies; and a case management-vocational preparation program, called Operation Success, operated by a community organization.

SOAR

Sixteen high schools established a mini-school called Student Opportunity For Advancement and Retention (SOAR). The programs existed prior to the dropout prevention initiative, but served a different target group. Consequently, in schools where SOAR already operated, staff were forced to begin targeting students who met the dropout prevention program criteria. SOAR is an alternative academic program designed to provide special supports to students having difficulty making academic progress. Schools are required to block four groups of 25 students each into four classes. Three of these must be major academic subjects, including English and math, and a fourth is occupational education. In addition, a fifth class period is programmed for a tutorial. An additional 50 students, who participated in the program the previous year but whose improved performance makes them no longer eligible, are offered a transitional program consisting of two academic classes of the kind described above.

One guidance counselor and as a rule, two paraprofessionals are assigned to the program. The ratio of 150 students to one counselor represents a sharp improvement over ratios of 400 and 500 students to one guidance counselor found in these schools. Counselors meet with students individually and also organize middle/high school linkage activities in order to ease middle school students' transition to high school. The paraprofessional staff monitor student attendance and make home visits to follow up on student absences. Finally, students are screened and referred for health services.

Despite the reduction in class size from 34 to 25, and the fact that students remained with the same group of peers throughout the day, student attendance was poor; 10 or fewer might attend on a given day. Further, students made little use of the tutoring sessions.

Strategies

The strategies model, in place in seven schools, utilized blocked programming, attendance monitoring and outreach in the same manner as SOAR. The main difference between the programs lay in the Strategies' schools flexibility in developing alternative approaches. The schools opted for the inclusion of career education and work experience. Community organizations provided these services in some cases; they offered career education, counseling and, sometimes, internships at such sites as hospitals. In other schools, teachers carried out these activities. One of the most instrumentally creative attempts to link school to work was in one school's communications center in which students attended communication arts and keyboarding classes and operated video equipment. The career education and work experience programs afforded students alternative, non-traditional, high interest educational programs, a goal shared by all AIDP high school programs.

Operation Success

The Operation Success program was operated by a large social service agency in three schools. It combined case management services, i.e., counseling, attendance monitoring, and outreach, with career education, which included counseling, skills training, and internships. Operation Success career education is described in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Funding

SOAR and Strategies were allocated on average \$200,000 per school. The actual figures ranged from \$78,933 to \$228,457, depending on school size. Operation Success was allocated on average \$350,000 per school for the programs it operated, with a range from \$346,000 to \$511,000.

CURRENT SYSTEMIC CHANGE EFFORTS

Like the categorical programs, the systemic dropout prevention programs provided a core of attendance improvement services to absentees; students received special attention from attendance outreach and counseling personnel. In addition, systemic programs were expected in greater or lesser degree to build schoolwide improvements around this core of support services and, drawing from a repertoire of validated program initiatives, direct the special services at non-targeted students as well. These initiatives included class size reduction, the creation of P.M. Schools and after school activities, the development of academic clusters (a house plan), part time job placement, and full time jobs for graduating seniors.

Schoolwide improvements added to the strength of add-ons for at-risk students by enriching the entire school environment to which these students were exposed: they also gave teachers hope that they were turning the school around, improving overall school climate, and able to attract high as well as low achieving students. Thus, their reach far exceeded that of categorical programs, although by exactly how much and with what significance to student performance is not fully determinable.

The ten high schools in the Dropout Prevention program were assigned to different intervention models. The models differed in the degree of their emphasis on systemic reform versus case management, i.e., the development of comprehensive support plans for individual students. Case management encompassed a range of student supports, predominantly attendance outreach and counseling and in some cases, job training and placement. Community-based organizations (CBOs) were hired to carry out case management in every school. Systemic improvements were those regarded as beneficial to the school at large; they were not targeted at particular individuals, but were aimed chiefly at the ninth and tenth grade levels since those are the points at which the greatest proportions of students drop out. All schools undertook both types of activities, but schools with a systemic emphasis had a much larger budget with which to make systemic improvements, while schools oriented to case management had little funding for systemic purposes.

Schools selected the particular school improvement strategies they wanted to use from a menu of items generated by the Assistant Superintendent for Dropout Prevention in conjunction with the principals of the DPP schools. The strategies that were adopted included class size reduction, a conflict resolution program, extracurricular activities, a P.M. School, the creation of academic clusters or houses, a part time jobs program, tutoring, and course enrichment.

Funding

The schools' level of program funding was determined on the basis of their dropout rates. Each school was allocated \$1000 x the average number of its students who had dropped out in each of the previous three years; in addition every school received \$150,000 in baseline funds. Schools' budgets ranged from \$337,000 to \$948,000. As a consequence of the funding formula, the larger DPP high schools had much larger budgets with which to mount dropout prevention efforts and were allowed to undertake extensive schoolwide improvements. The amount spent on systemic improvements in these schools ranged from \$377,000 to \$641,000. The smaller allocations for the smaller high schools, on the other hand, limited their effort to the case management model. Most of their budgets went to a community-based organization (CBO) to perform case management services. Only the baseline allotment of \$150,000 was allowed for bettering the school itself.

In order to give a better sense of the kind of systemic change the dropout prevention program stimulated, two schools' programs are described in some detail below; they were chosen to reflect the range in magnitude of systemic change attempted by the laboratory schools.

SCHOOL A: A MOSTLY SYSTEMIC MODEL

School Conditions

School A undertook the most dramatic schoolwide reforms of any of the schools; its high dropout rate and large size defined one of the largest at-risk populations (644 students) and budgets, nearly \$800,000. The principal and program staff crafted a very ambitious program whose goal was nothing less than to turn the school into one which could attract even the best students. The school seemed to have many of the ingredients for accomplishing this goal besides the necessary financial support. The principal was widely respected, several strong faculty members joined the program staff, and the