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ABSTRACT
                Over 35 percent of all Western Region students (in
Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah) entering the ninth grade in
1980 failed to complete high school. This paper provides education
policy makers with an overall understanding of the Western Region
dropout problem, reviews available research, analyzes alternative
change strategies, and briefly describes three categories of specific
policy options. Students' decisions to leave school are shaped by
numerous interrelated factors, including personal reasons, family
characteristics, and disappointments in the school. Schools
contribute to school leaving by creating dull and uninspiring
programs, allowing staff insensitivity to student needs, and failing
to develop effective management systems to identify, track, and serve
the needs of at-risk students. Promising approaches to reducing early
exit behavior must deal with student "disconnectedness" and address
three policy levels--the community, the school, and the individual
staff member. Coordinated change at all levels is required for
maximum effectiveness. Six strategies for reducing school leaving can
be identified: risk management, environmental management, incentive
management, program management, staff management, and culture
management. Three policy options are available: (1) strengthening
school cultures and programs; (2) retaining at-risk youth; and (3)
enhancing career and vocational programs. (134 references) (MLH)

STUDENT DROPOUT PROBLEM: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

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This paper will provide education policymakers with an overall understanding of the nature and extent of the high school dropout problem in the Western Region. A review of available data and research on this complex issue is followed by an analysis of alternative strategies for policy action and brief scriptions of three categories of specific policy options.

More than 35 percent of all Western Region students entering the ninth grade in 1980 failed to complete high school (35.4 percent in Arizona, 36.8 percent in California, 33.5 percent in Nevada, and 21.3 percent in Utah). The social and economic losses to the nation resulting from the dropout problem are staggering. Catterall (1985) estimated the loss in tax revenue resulting from early school leaving by the class of 1981 alone to be about $68.4 billion. This does not include the related costs of unemployment, welfare and crime which are higher for the at-risk population.

Whether dropping out of school is a cause of social hardship or one of its symptoms is debatable. But one cannot ignore the fact that certain segments of the population are disproportionately affected. The poor, Blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics are among those segments. Special attention must be accorded to the nation's poor and minority populations if the problems of failure and early school leaving are to be alleviated.

The first step toward understanding the overall problem involves distinguishing between "dropouts" and "pushouts." Some problems in the lives of individual students contribute to their decisions to stop attending classes. Students who succumb to these problems are appropriately called school dropouts. At the same time, however, critical factors within the schools serve to encourage some youngsters to leave early. Students who are reacting to these factors are more appropriately identified as school pushouts. While student and school factors are obviously interwoven, making the dropout-pushout distinction allows identification of important dimensions of the overall problem and lays a proper foundation for effective policy responses.

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On the student side of the equation the most important factors affecting the decision to drop out include:

1) troubled responses to the school, such as poor grades, feelings of alienation and irregular attendance;

2) complicating family and community factors, such as poverty, lack of support for education; and

3) discouraging personal circumstances, such as need and opportunity to work, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse and other deviant behavior.

Discussion of these student problems is limited in this paper, but they are briefly summarized to indicate their importance and impact on the problem of early school leaving.

School program and management problems include such factors as:

1) poor school climate or culture, such as impersonal, fragmented and isolating environments, insensitive or uncaring staff;

2) inadequate or non-existent programs tedious, boring and irrelevant activities; few alternatives for at-risk students; and

3) weak management systems that fail to identify or track at-risk students.

Analysis of these school system factors leads to identification of several strategies for responding to the problem of low graduation rates in the public schools. Responses at three different levels of action are described. First, actions close to the students -- like better counseling or professional development programs for teachers -- can be expected to have a direct impact on the rate at which students decide to leave the system. Second, school program and curriculum reforms, though more remote from students' immediate decisions, are more likely to produce long term improvements in the holding power of the school. And third, beyond the school itself, significant improvements could be generated through changes in public welfare policies related to family integrity and relief of poverty.

This paper concentrates on school and teacher level changes. A series of policy options are discussed. Some are intended to improve the overall climate or culture of the school system and strengthen attention 1 - the problems of at-risk youth. Others identify programs and incentive systems for encouraging at-risk youth to remain in school. The remaining suggestions

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deal with improving vocational education and career counseling programs in ways that are likely to increase retention rates among at-risk students.

Ameliorating the problem of early school leaving for very large numbers of students requires aggressive and broad ranging public policy changes. Schools cannot be expected to solve the problem by themselves, but they can make major contributions through staff, program and management system changes. These changes are not likely to be sponsored by school leavers -- they have no "alumni" associations, no booster clubs, and very little economic or political power. Advocacy for the at-risk population must be undertaken by policymakers who have the wisdom to see it as critical to the future of economic strength and democratic governance for the nation, and a commitment to act for those who do not know how to demand resources and attention for themselves.

How Serious is the Dropout/Pushout Problem?

Educational opportunity may mean something very different to individual students, teachers, parents, taxpayers or the business community. For some it is the joy of growing competence and sensitivity. For others economic development, employment preparation or access to the American way of life are the dominant concerns. Whatever values are used to measure its worth, every missed opportunity for educating the nation's youth raises important questions about the losses to both individual students and the society as a whole.

It is remarkably difficult to discover the exact nature or even the full extent of early school leaving. Accurate statistics are hard to obtain. And the available statistics are not easily associated with specific student or school characteristics.

How Many Students Actually Leave School Early?

The Department of Education estimated the national survival rate for the Class of 1984 to be 70.9 percent. This means that 29.1 percent of those who entered as freshmen in 1980 did not graduate with their classmates. The picture in the Western Region, while mixed, is somewhat worse. Utah had the best survival rate at 78.7 percent; Arizona, California and Nevada all had graduation rates below the national average -- 33.5 percent dropped out in Nevada, 35.4 percent in Arizona and 36.8 percent in California. These U.S. Department of Education estimates have been disputed by some states. The California Postsecondary Education Commission, for example, estimates that the Class of 1984 lost only 28.8 percent of those who entered the ninth grade in 1980 (which would raise the survival rate slightly above the national average). Whatever the exact figures, however, the dropout/pushout rate among high school students is very high. Equally important, this rate has remained at or above 25 percent

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for more than a quarter of a century.

Who are the Dropouts/Pushouts?

Data collected by Bullis (1986) reveals that the at-risk population is characterized by:

o   Low or failing grades, and/or low test scores.
o   Placement in a remedial track program.
o   Bored or apathetic attitudes toward school.
o   Chronic truancy.
o   Overage for grade.
o   In-school delinquency record.
o   Parents who did not complete high school.
o   Families with serious economic problems.
o   Single parent head of household.
o   Minority group status (ethnic, racial, linguistic, or cultural).
o   Social isolation from peers, indicated by lower participation in academic or extra-curricular activities.
o   Low academic self-esteem, indicated by low perception of ability to succeed at academic tasks.
o   Low sense of personal autonomy (i.e., low power to influence environment or effect desired outcomes).
o   Low educational and occupational aspirations.
o   Teenage marriage or pregnancy.

These factors interact with a number of related juvenile problems which contribute to early school leaving. The Education Commission of the States identified as the most important: 1) drug abuse, 2) teenage pregnancy, 3) crime, and 4) suicide. Drug use by high school students increased steadily through the 1970s; by 1980 nearly two-thirds of all high school seniors reported having used an illegal drug. The use of alcohol, in particular, is rising. Arrests for drunkenness among youths under 18 tripled between 1960 and 1980. About one million teenagers (more than one out of every 15 young women) become pregnant every year -- 650,000 (1 of 20) are unmarried. More than half of all arrests for serious crime in the United States involve youth under 21. And suicide is now the second leading cause of death among White males, preceded by "accidents" which may involve unrecognized suicides.

How Much Does the Dropout/Pushout Problem Cost?

Some attempts have been made to quantify the costs of early school leaving by large numbers of young people. The Appalachian Regional Commission (cited by Mann, 1986) estimates that dropouts earn about $237 billion less over their lifetimes than high school graduates. As a result, state and local governments collect $71 billion less in taxes. Catterall (1985) also

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attempted to estimate the losses to society resulting from early school leaving. He notes that dropouts face higher unemployment rates and must turn to welfare and special assistance to a greater degree than their graduating counterparts. He projects the loss in tax revenue resulting from early school leaving by the Class of 1981 to be $68.4 billion -- very close to the Appalachian Regional Commission estimate.

According to Mann (1986), the United States economic base is shifting because of lost capacity in the labor force. Steel and textile markets have been dramatically eroded, as have automobiles and other durable goods. The result is a changing demand for skilled, well educated and socially more sophisticated workers in new technology and service jobs. The National Alliance of Business (1986) also examined this problem and concluded that there is a "growing and pervasive mismatch between job needs and workers skills." They urge an increased emphasis on education, noting that unemployment is 60 percent higher for Hispanic youth than for Whites and that only 43 percent of low income Black youths graduated from high school. The net result, according to this study, is "lower productivity, higher supervisory time, and a poorer quality product." Leaving high school before graduation is costly for both the student and the national economy.

Student vs. School Factors Leading to Early Exit

Early exit from school can be seen as either a student problem or a school program problem. In the first case, it is seen as resulting from factors operating within the personal lives of the at-risk youth -- factors that discourage school attendance or positively encourage students to see dropping out as an attractive option. In the second instance, early exit is seen as the result of identifiable school characteristics that reduce the attractiveness of continued attendance or actively push students out of the schools. The problem is interactive, of course -- students with certain characteristics are much more likely to leave school early than others. These are the "at-risk" students for whom quality schooling can make the difference between success and failure.

Differentiating between student dropout decisions and school pushout factors is especially useful when considering policy options for ameliorating the early exit problem. Student factors are very important, but difficult to tackle through state level policy. School factors are more easily tackled, but they are subtle and complex. This paper concentrates on the school factors. Student characteristics that increase the risk of early exit will be reviewed first, however, in order to clarify the context within which school policy changes must operate to be effective.

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The Student View: Origins of the Decision to Dropout

The decision to drop out of school is not a simple one. Students are obviously reacting to a complex array of personal, family and school factors which, in combination, make leaving school more attractive than completing it. Disentangling the factors that put students "at-risk" is not easy, but the available research literature has identified at least seven specific factors that increase the probability that students will leave school early. They are:

1. Poor grades.
2. Feelings of not belonging or alienation.
3. Irregular attendance and frequent tardiness.
4. Family socio-economic status.
5. Economic need and/or the opportunity to work.
6. Teenage pregnancy.
7. Socially deviant behavior including drug and alcohol abuse.

It is difficult to get accurate estimates of the extent to which each of these factors increase the risk of dropping out of school. Obviously, they interact in complex ways that are difficult to understand and almost impossible to measure. It is helpful, however, to divide the known risk factors into three basic groups. The first three -- poor grades, alienation and attendance problems -- involve student reactions to their school experiences. Family socio-economic status is not a single factor, but a shorthand description of a broad array of psychological, cultural, social and economic forces at work shaping student feelings and attitudes as well as creating powerful expectations for their behavior. The last three risk factors -- employment, pregnancy and drug abuse -- reflect students' own personal experiences and lifestyles.

The available research on each of these risk enhancing factors is summarized briefly. The review is not intended to be exhaustive. The primary purpose is to lay a solid foundation for an analysis of how school programs and policies can be expected to help reduce their effects and increase the likelihood that students will complete high school.

Dropping Out as a Reaction to School Experiences

Dropouts have a record of disappointment in school. This disappointment shows up vividly in both objective measures of learning and attendance and the more subjective measures of attitude and feeling tone. Three early warning signs are poor grades, irregular attendance, and feelings of alienation.

Poor grades. Lack of academic success is a consistent and clear contributor to dropout risk. Analysis of the High School

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and Beyond (Ekstrom, et al., 1986) data revealed that the typical sophomore who remains in school reports an average grade of B, while those who later drop out report an average grade of C. According to one analysis, (Ekstrom, et al., 1986) one third of those who left school did so because of poor grades. Bullis (1986) cites data indicating that about 50 percent of all junior high school students entering high school with a D average drop out before finishing.

Mann (1986) elaborates on the risk resulting from poor academic performance. He cites earlier research (Bachman, 1978) indicating that when students are required to repeat a grade, the risk of dropping out later is increased by 40-50 percent. Students retained in two grades have a 90 percent higher dropout rate. Hence, non-promotion does not appear to be a particularly promising strategy for working with students who are in academic trouble. It is not clear whether retaining poor performing students has a positive effect on those whose performance is marginal, or whether their removal from their class group makes it easier for teachers to successfully teach other students.

The problem of academic performance is especially complicated for disadvantaged children. As noted by Bullis (1986), the summer break period tends to produce learning losses for these children in comparison with their relatively advantaged peers. Early intervention programs with economically disadvantaged children have a positive impact on the dropout risk. Comparison of economically disadvantaged children who participated in the Perry Preschool with children from similar backgrounds who did not attend preschool indicates that by the time they were 19 years old, the preschool program participants had an 18 percent higher high school graduation rate (67 percent vs. 49 percent).

Research on mastery learning programs indicates that the level of cognitive skills which a child brings to school explains about 50 percent of the difference in achievement rates (Bullis, 1986). This suggests that early intervention, regular monitoring, and a firm commitment to preparing students adequately for all academic class work could materially reduce academic failure and reduce the dropout risk.

Irregular attendance. Truancy and tardiness are important factors increasing the risk that students will eventually drop out of school. The Center for Educational Policy and Management (de Jung and Duckworth, 1985) conducted a comprehensive study of six high schools in the western United States. Among the findings most relevant to this discussion was that dropping out is more a consequence of attendance patterns than of conscious choice. The majority of students destined to become dropout statistics continued to believe that they would graduate from high school long after their pattern of poor attendance had

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become obvious. They did not consciously link their attendance record to their academic failure and later decision to quit school. Fully 85 percent of those students with high absence rates indicated that they were satisfied with Cs and Ds in their coursework. And, of course, GPAs decreased sharply with increased absenteeism. Students with many absences accounted for 84 percent of all students with low GPAs. Students who failed one course had double the absence rate of their non-failing peers. Those who failed more than one course had absence rates triple the overall school average.

Alienation. At a more subjective level, students who drop out tend to have intense feelings of isolation and alienation from the school. In Ekstrom's analysis of the High School and Beyond data, fully a third of all dropouts gave "did not like school" as a primary reason for leaving. Mann's (1986) study reported even higher percentages -- 51 percent for males and 33 percent for females. Feelings of alienation and disliking school add substantially to the risk of early school leaving.

Alienation and isolation are normally more intense as students enter adolescence. In recent interviews with 20 dropouts, the majority described "phasing out" during their junior high years (Matranga, 1986). This process seems to be exacerbated by movement to the typically less personal instructional environments of junior and senior high schools. Departmentalization of teaching, shorter class sessions with fewer structured social interaction processes, and a much larger school population surround students with daily reminders of how easily they can "get lost in the crowd". At the same time, they are withdrawing emotionally and academically from school.

Minority groups suffer the anguish of alienation more frequently than majority White students and have commensurately higher dropout rates. The High School and Beyond data indicate that American Indians have the highest dropout rates (29 percent), followed by Hispanics (18 percent) and Blacks (17 percent). If schools are to accept responsibility for reducing the dropout rate, they will need to develop effective ways of coping with cultural alienation.

Dropping Out as a Response to Family Socio-economic Status

Family structure and socio-economic conditions play a major role in shaping children's attitudes toward school. Where families give strong support to education, and have the economic and cultural resources to support it, children are much more likely to go to school regularly, achieve well, and remain in school until graduation. However, the family as it is known historically is almost a thing of the past (Hodgkinson, 1985). In 1985, only seven percent of the nation's households consisted of a working father, a mother at home, and two or more children.

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This is contrasted with 1950 when 60 percent of all households comprised of such nuclear families. In addition, more than 40 percent of today's women are in the workforce. According to Hodgkinson's analysis, 59 of every 100 children born today will not reach the age of 18 in a household with both natural parents.

Though opportunities for economic advancement for middle class minority group members have expanded significantly in recent years, there has been a startling increase in the number of poverty level households headed by Black and Hispanic females. Hodgkinson notes that 90 percent of the increase in childhood poverty is found in these households. Currently, nearly half of the nation's poor are children. There are 14.6 million Hispanics and 26.5 million Blacks in the population today. By 2020, there will be 44 million Blacks and 47 million Hispanics in a population of about 265 million people; more than 1 of every 3 Americans will be non-White).

Schools are failing the children of these minority citizens in very large numbers. But, while minority population groups make up disproportionately large numbers of those who fail to complete high school, research by Wehlage and Rutter (1986) reveals that family socio-economic variables, not race or ethnicity, are the real sources of this imbalance. Among middle class citizens, minority students are no more likely to drop out than are Whites. The minority children who are leaving school early have parents with the same problems as White dropouts -- low income and poorly educated parents.

Put more positively, educational achievements of parents are reflected in the educational successes of their children. Rumberger (1983) shows that a one-year increase in the educational level of poor White mothers reduces the probability that their daughters will drop out of school by 4 percentage points. In general there is less support for educational pursuits in the homes of the at-risk population. Books, newspapers, a time and a place for study are all much less available in these homes. Mothers of the high-risk population have much lower academic expectations for their children and are generally less involved in monitoring their children's in and out of school activities (Eckstrom, et al, 1986). Parental interest and involvement in the schools appears to be a strong factor in helping children resist the decision to quit. Moreover, poorly educated adults frequently have less intense commitments to school success for their children. The result is a cyclic perpetuation of the dropout problem -- dropouts in one generation have children who are much more at risk of ending their education without achieving a high school diploma.

Dropping Out as a Response to Personal Circumstances

While family culture creates conditions encouraging children

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to remain in school or leave early, students' personal
circumstances directly influence the dropout decision. Three
personal experience factors -- the need or opportunity to work,
pregnancy, and alcohol or drug abuse -- have been identified in
recent research as potent factors affecting the dropout rate.

Working. A large number of students leave school each year
to go to work. Since they are disproportionately from poor
families, need rather than opportunity may be the more pressing
economic factor. In any event, among students responding to the
High School and Beyond surveys (Ekstrom et al, 1986), about one
in five dropouts indicated that they left school because they
were, "offered a job and chose to work." The percentage of male
students offering this reason was larger (27 percent) than that
for female dropouts (11 percent).

Alienated and unhappy students find work even more
attractive than those with simple economic need. The evidence
shows that high school dropouts identify more with adult status
than with their adolescent peers (McDill, Natriello, Pallas,
1985). This adult identity is found in full time employment.

Part-time employment for in-school youth probably plays a
significant role in the separation process. Students employed 14
hours or less per week are not significantly more likely to
drop out of school (Mann, 1986). As the number of working hours
increase, however, the risks of dropping out rise substantially.
Students working 15 to 21 hours per week are 50 percent more
likely to drop out than the average student, and those who work
22 or more hours per week are 100 percent more likely to leave
school early.

Dropping out to go to work creates new problems for many
students. Their employment opportunities are concentrated in low
paying entry level jobs -- jobs with disproportionately high
risks of unemployment. Among the High School and Beyond
students, only 60 percent of the male dropouts and 33 percent of
the females were actually employed either full or part-time.
Employers who offer initial employment may actually prefer
students who have completed or are actively pursuing their high
school diploma and may replace dropouts with graduates. In a
1983 survey, 643 employers reported that for 82 percent of all
job openings they screened out applicants who had not completed a
high school diploma.

It is not at all clear that students who decide to drop out
to go to work are fully cognizant of the economic realities they
are about to confront. No doubt, the harsh reality of the
youth job market contributed significantly to the fact that 51
percent of the male and 55 percent of the female dropouts in the
High School and Beyond study reported that they "regretted"
leaving school. It probably also contributed to the fact that

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about 25 percent of the males and 17 percent of the females sought some type of further training after dropping out of school.

Pregnancy. Perhaps the most startling aspect of the high school dropout problem is the extent to which it is linked to adolescent pregnancy. About one million adolescent girls (about one out of every ten) conceive each year, and that 600,000 of these young women carry their pregnancy to full term. An estimated 400,000 of these births are to girls under the age of 17. Eight of ten teenage mothers never finish high school. Overall, between 1979 and 1982, 2.7 million young women left American high schools without graduating. Mann estimates that one million (more than 1 in 3) left for family reasons -- 45 percent for pregnancy, 37 percent got married, 18 percent had home care responsibilities. The simple truth is that half of all females leaving school early do so because they are pregnant. This fact, combined with the earlier observation that poorly educated mothers are more likely to produce children who drop out of school, underscores the double significance of teenage pregnancy in the school dropout equation.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse. Sharply increased national attention is being given to drug and alcohol abuse among the nation's youth. The statistics support the propriety of this emphasis. More than half of all serious crimes in the United States are committed by persons under the age of 21. Many of these crimes are directly linked to alcohol and drug usage. Arrests among youth under the age of 18 for drug abuse increased 60 fold between 1960 and 1980. And arrests for drunkenness rose by about 300 percent during the same period (Sherraden as cited by Green, 1985). Tragically, one of every six deaths among young people is alcohol-related.

Societal factors impinging on the problems of drug and alcohol are complex and beyond the scope of this discussion. There is little doubt about the gravity of the problem, however, and none at all about its contribution to the dropout problem in the schools.

To Summarize, approximately one million young people every year leave school without finishing. Their decisions to drop out are shaped by a number of personal factors -- the need and opportunity to work, pregnancy, drug or alcohol abuse. They are also influenced by family characteristics, especially poverty and low education among parents. And they are made in reaction to disappointments in the school -- poor grades, absenteeism and alienation. These factors cannot be viewed in isolation; they interact and mutually reinforce each other in urging students toward early exit from school programs. No doubt there are other factors, not yet adequately studied or fully understood, which further complicate the picture.

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As important as these personal factors may be, however, not all students who have the pre-disposing conditions succumb to the pressure to leave school. Many finish, most of those who do become richer in both personal and economic terms as a result. It is important, therefore, to consider what school factors encourage early school leaving -- adding pushout pressure to dropout tendencies to swell the ranks of America's under-educated youth.

The School View: The Pushout Process

Although some students are more at risk than others, early school leaving is substantially influenced by the overall character of the school system.   Three basic elements of the educational system have a demonstrated tendency to push students out before finishing high school.   They are: 1) an unsupportive classroom climate or school culture, 2) a lack of appropriate programs for at-risk students, and 3) inadequate management systems for identifying, tracking or serving the at-risk student.

Careful analysis of school factors interfering with school program completion is particularly important.   Improvement in the schools is much more likely to be within the reach of state policymakers than are changes in the student factors discussed in the previous section.   Recent events demonstrate that significant changes in school programs and practices will not be easy.   It is important, therefore, to develop an overall framework for approaching the student retention problem, and to avoid investing heavily in unproductive change efforts.

The School Climate and Culture Problems

Tedious and irrelevant programs.   Students who leave school before graduation are demonstrably less satisfied with the overall character of the typical high school.   Early school leavers find schools dull, tedious and boring.   Goodlad (1984) has described in considerable detail the narrowness and lack of creativity in contemporary school programs.   Lecture and practice dominate the delivery system.   Individualization is rare in school systems that have changed little in the last several decades.

Where dropout prevention programs are recognized as effective, educators point with pride to smaller class sizes, innovative student reward systems, fast-paced learning cycles, flexible time options, and an overall "student centeredness." After careful study of effective programs, Wehlage (1986) concludes that dropout prevention will require, "a redefinition of school work for students and teachers that will allow a

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greater number of students to achieve success, satisfaction and continue with additional schooling."

Contrary to the feelings of some, high school dropouts are not particularly disruptive to the school system. To the contrary, the data suggest that they are more the victims than the perpetrators of hostile rejection. A University of Pennsylvania study (Fine, 1986) notes that dropouts find their high schools to be unresponsive and, "at times, assaultive and rejecting." This study concludes, however, that school reforms alone will not be enough to stem the exodus of unhappy students. They must be accompanied by "a package of economic and social reforms" as well.

Stern (1985) and Matranga (1986) both find school dropouts to be suffering from a general "disconnectedness" from the secondary school system. They urge the development of programs to stimulate students' personal involvement.

Insensitive staff. When asked what they would say to the president of the school board about how to reduce the number of dropouts in their schools, the majority of students in one study focused on district hiring and firing practices. They urged, "please tell them to hire teachers who like kids" (Matranga, 1986). This point is given support by the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education (1986) which lists among its principles in A Blueprint for Success that, "The human connection is all important as a prerequisite for success in meeting the needs of those students who are at risk of dropping out of school," and that, "Student-centered education involves the uninvolved."

Students are not equally subject to the rejection of teachers and other school officials. Research indicates that about 80 percent of the typical teacher's criticism of students is directed toward only 20 percent of the students and that Blacks and other minority students are much more likely to be suspended or expelled from school (Mann, 1986). Moreover, as Bullis (1986) notes, "the fact that someone cares enough to help" has a major impact on reducing the probability that students will leave school. The "teacher factor" is consistently identified as one of the most important aspects of every student's school experience. When Wehlage described the characteristics of successful programs for at-risk students, he emphasized that teachers in these programs believe their role extends well beyond being "conveyers of knowledge." They believe that they are responsible for educating the "whole" child and are able to communicate a sense of caring and interest in students. In the dynamic environment of the modern high school, this caring, flexible and innovative approach to teaching requires, "an enhanced sense of professional accountability among educators toward all students" (Wehlage, 1983).

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Poor or Non-existent Programs for Potential Dropouts

States have done much to increase the risks of dropping out on the part of marginal students in recent years. Forty-three states have enacted new high school graduation standards (all of them increasing expected performance) and 15 now require a minimum competency examination. While there are no systematic studies of the overall effects of these new requirements, it is quite likely that they contribute materially to the pushout process. In Nevada, about two percent of all would-be graduates do not pass the state's competency test and hence cannot qualify for a diploma.

One study (McDill, Natriello and Pallas, 1985) indicates that the failure rates on competency tests are much higher for minority and economically disadvantaged students. More specifically, these researchers found that, "the possibilities that (1) a restricted core of curriculum requirements may lead to greater academic stratification and less student choice in the schools, (2) more demanding time requirements in school may lead to more conflicts between the demands of schools and other demands placed on students, and (3) required levels of achievement may lead to more student experience with failure without apparent remedies." Surely, this means that many marginal students give up in the face of elusive and unattainable goals. The prospect of failure in school eventually gives way to other avenues of expression that seem less threatening and more likely to lead to success.

Natriello's (1985) study of four suburban high schools found that students are more likely to psychologically disassociate themselves from the high school when standards are unreachable. This does not mean, of course, that high standards should not be adopted or maintained. It does suggest, however, that alternative teaching strategies need to be utilized to assist at-risk students in meeting new academic challenges.

Inadequate Management Systems for Responding to At-Risk Youth

Management systems for identifying and meeting the needs of at-risk students early in their careers are clearly lacking in the nation's schools. Current management systems tend to emphasize accountability for performance rather than provision of needed services. There are a series of "milestones" and "safeguards" along the way which serve to screen students, to categorize them for service and label them for remediation or special education services. But these programs have historically concentrated on channelling students into specialized programs where they are encouraged to lower their aspirations.

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The individualized education programs (IEPs) required by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) represent a major break in this pattern. When appropriately carried out, these IEPs provide the basis for tracking an individual student's progress and mobilizing unique school resources to support it. Very few of the most seriously at-risk children qualify for these services, however. They tend to be academically marginal, but not identifiably handicapped. Moreover, they are more transient, quiet, and more easily neglected than their successful counterparts. The parents of such children tend to be less involved in school and demand less direct attention to their children's learning needs. Hence, it is easy for at-risk children to be overlooked and underserved until a pattern of low self-esteem and serious academic failure is firmly entrenched.

Evidence that early intervention works, and that special attention to marginal students can improve their chances for success abounds in the research literature. But there is little evidence that this knowledge is being utilized to design systems to identify and follow students throughout their school careers. Perhaps schools would benefit from the practice of "risk management" utilized by some insurance companies to concentrate specialist attention on risk prone clients.

To summarize: schools contribute to the risk that students will leave before completing their education by creating conservative, dull and uninspiring programs; allowing too many staff to become insensitive to student needs; and by failing to develop effective management systems to identify, track and serve the needs of at-risk students.

A common theme in both the student dropout and the school pushout research is the concept of student "disconnectedness." Students with various risk characteristics become disconnected from the school in disproportionately large numbers. School programs with certain alienating features have a propensity to encourage this disconnection and hence to hasten school leaving decisions. This disconnectedness provides a starting point for policy development by raising the question of whether it is possible to identify such disconnection early and to develop strategies for overcoming it.

Strategies for Action: What Might Policymakers Do?

Promising approaches to the problem of reducing early exit from the nation's high schools must address three distinct policy levels -- the community, the school and the individual educational staff member. Effective action at each level requires attention to a unique set of social, political and economic factors affecting student decisions to leave school.

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Coordinated changes at all three levels will be required for maximum effectiveness.

Three Levels of Action

Community and Family support. At the broadest level, social policies must support families by ameliorating identifiable risk factors associated with poverty and other community and family conditions encouraging early exit. Policies at this level involve economic, social service and public welfare issues that go far beyond ordinary education policy matters. They impinge on school success in easily recognized ways, however, and must be considered in any comprehensive approach to this problem.

School organization and program reform. An intermediate level approach involves changing basic elements in school organizations, program structures and cultural frameworks. Changes at this level are probably the most promising because the policies involved are best understood and easiest for state decisionmakers to control directly. As described in more detail below, education policymakers could substantially reduce the risk of early school leaving by addressing weaknesses in current school operations -- reducing alienation, improving program variety and relevance to students, changing student and teacher reward structures, and providing programs specifically tailored to the needs of at-risk youth.

Staff development and program planning. Closest to the student, tackling the problem of early student exit involves expanding the sensitivity of educators to the special needs of at-risk students and enhancing their capacity to respond to those needs. At this level, education policymakers could make considerable inroads into the problem by concentrating on staff training and program planning efforts within existing school organizations. There is little question that a significant number of students currently in danger of dropping out could be retained in the schools if educators had a better understanding of the factors that lead to early exit and were given strong encouragement to provide these students with more personal attention and greater support.

Strategic Interventions

At least six distinct strategies for reducing the risks of early school leaving can be identified. The six are distinguished by the assumptions they make about the most appropriate leverage points for action. Though some address one level more than others, each of the six are capable of addressing critical factors related to the dropout process at community and staff development levels as well as in the design and implementation of school programs. Each strategy is described

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conceptually in this section, and then utilized to identify concrete policy options in the concluding section of this paper.

Strategy #1: Risk Management. One of the most obvious limitations of current policy is the absence of an overarching risk management orientation within the public schools. Unlike insurance firms or law enforcement and public health agencies, public schools do not maintain actuarial data on their experience with clients. This is particularly apparent in the case of students at-risk of early school leaving. There are not even good mechanisms for collecting data on when and why students leave, much less ways of monitoring the incidence of various risk producing factors. Considerable improvement in the treatment of at-risk students could be expected to follow if policymakers would take the necessary steps to create and maintain good records on the nature and incidence of the various factors suspected of encouraging them to leave school. Linking school attendance, discipline and achievement data to careful recording and analysis of other risk enhancing factors would provide schools with an early warning system and a set of clearly defined targets for intervention. At the present time, it is not even possible to know for sure how many or which students are dropping out entirely and which may be finding other routes to educational attainment.

Strategy #2: Environmental Management. The strong association between dropping out of school and social factors like poverty, family culture, pregnancy, crime and drug abuse suggest a second basic strategy for intervention -- development of policies focussed on affecting the environment within which children are reared. Concern with how governmental actions impact the quality of family life in America, a recurring theme in public policy debates, has been given fresh impetus by a recent report released by the Education Department (Education Week, 11/19/86, p. 14). While this report is heavily colored by the economic growth and anti-government rhetoric of neo-conservatism, it raises fundamental questions about how public policy can or should be used to reduce the chances that children will become the victims of poverty, prejudice, alienation and neglect. To what extent the nation's poor are more at risk simply because they don't have money, or because they are the victims of social injustice, or lack technical skills or moral character is a matter of continuing debate that goes well beyond the scope of this paper. This much is clear, however; the risks of dropping out of school are not randomly distributed in the population. Some children are much more at-risk than others, and it is important for policymakers to consider how much schools can be expected to overcome risk factors that have been with children since birth.

Strategy #3: Incentive Management. Another way of affecting the dropout rate is to develop public policies that

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provide fiscal and other incentives to individual students, their families, educators and other key actors in the community to encourage staying in school. In its provocative study of the dropout problem, the California Assembly Office of Research (1980) highlights inadequacies in the incentive system generated by school attendance, finance, and child labor laws. By combining responsibility for enforcing compulsory attendance laws with fixed reimbursement for the costs of education, state policy creates a classic incentive problem. If it becomes more expensive in either fiscal or work effort terms to secure attendance and teach the marginal students than schools receive in reimbursement, lax enforcement of school attendance laws is almost inevitable. And, while it appears quite logical to link reimbursement of educational costs to actual student attendance, the schools are again faced with a real incentive to reduce reported absences.

Something of the magnitude of these incentive problems can be seen in school district experience with the "search and serve" requirements of PL 94-142. Relatively large fiscal incentives are apparently needed to offset the disruption of normal school routines that result from efforts to serve hard to teach children. Magnitude is not the only issue in incentive system development, however. Policymakers need to give careful attention to the question of who should get the incentives as well as to what criteria should be used to control their flow.

Strategy #4: Program Management. Creation of special dropout programs is rapidly becoming the most prevalent strategy in schools. Some programs are intended to increase the holding power of schools by supporting the continued involvement of at-risk students in regular school programs. General school improvement, reductions in class size, counseling, tutoring, and various types of extra-curricular activities for potentially disaffected students fall into this class. Other programs seek the development of alternative programs that will allow marginal students to complete high school requirements outside the mainstream -- special classes, alternative high schools, vocational and occupational programs. Still others provide "backup" systems, permitting students who have dropped out (or are about to) to secure high school diplomas in other ways -- GED programs and high school proficiency tests.

Strategy #5: Staff Management. While program development is the strategy of choice, there is good reason to believe that policymakers should consider staff development for teachers and administrators equally important. Alienation from school staff is an obvious source of student disaffection. And it is equally apparent that training programs for both teachers and administrators give too little attention to the development of special techniques for responding to the needs of at-risk youth.

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Strategy #6: Culture Management. With increasing frequency, words like ethos, climate and culture are found in thoughtful discussions of school effectiveness. The importance of institutional cultures in the development of a strong sense of individual identity and collective purpose has been widely recognized in private sector industries as well as schools and other public agencies. How public policy decisions can be used to define and support these cultures is less clear. It is certainly possible for aggressive reform policies to disrupt existing cultural systems and to induce both staff and client alienation and apathy. In some cases the disruption arises because funding policies reward cynical and opportunistic staff behavior. In others, cultures are weakened because staff are, in fact, making a good faith effort to comply with the expectations of policies which they do not fully understand or support.

It is also possible to observe and describe the major features of strong school cultures. Shared goals and social values, fair enforcement of rules, refusal to allow slipshod or irresponsible actions to go unchallenged, and a firm belief in the ultimate value of the institution's basic mission are some of the most prominent features of a strong culture. Public schools in America would, no doubt, be well served if policymakers could discover better ways of articulating cultural values and supporting their development in day-to-day school operations.

Policy Options for Reducing School Dropout Rates

We turn now to an examination of policy options that promises substantial relief for the problem of early exit from high school. Attention will be confined to _educational_ policies. We leave to others the important matter of linking school retention to broader social policy changes.

Three basic options are available to education policymakers. The first is to concentrate on improving overall school system performance -- giving special attention to creating opportunities and incentives for at-risk students. The second option is to build special programs that support at-risk students -- providing services that will help them stay in school until graduation. The third is to expand alternative programs for students who are not likely to succeed in the regular school environment, with special attention given to expanding and improving vocational and career education programs. While these three policy options are in competition for very scarce resources, they are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive. To the extent that fiscal and staff energy resources are available, they can all be utilized in a comprehensive attack on the problem.

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Option 1:   Strengthening School Cultures and Programs

A number of strategies could be employed to strengthen the core program and cultural integrity of the American high school. If dropout prevention is taken as a primary goal, the starting point is development of an unobtrusive risk management data system capable of identifying and monitoring student progress through the school.   The system must enable educators to assess risk factors and map the characteristics of programs that are successful in offsetting those risks.   At a minimum, this means developing a system that links student achievement data with school program, attendance, discipline, socio-economic status and school counseling program data.

The next step is to carefully review the incentive structures used to reward both educators and students for participation in school programs.   Incentives must be appropriate in magnitude -- large enough to offset the real costs of education, but not so large as to encourage inflating records. Moreover, the incentives need to be clearly linked to behavior that can actually be controlled by recipents.

With an information system and an incentive system in place, schools should then be encouraged to modify programs to accommodate identified risk reduction factors.   Primary group size, especially for at-risk students, needs to be reduced. Greater autonomy can be provided to smaller program units by creating smaller schools or creating "school within a school" programs to give students stronger cultural identities. Experiments with new instructional arrangements need to be encouraged, both to build an atmosphere of openness and excitement and to find instructional strategies that provide meaningful and timely feedback and rewards to at-risk students.

Above all, at-risk students benefit from frequent, intensely personal contacts with teachers who believe that education is important, that the students are capable, and that it is appropriate to expect high performance from them.

Viewed from the vantage point of this policy option, dropout prevention is only one aspect of the overall need for secondary school reform and improvement.   Dropouts are seen as a symptom of basic problems in both school and society.   They leave school because school programs are tedious and uninteresting, because they have limited prospects of putting school learning to work in their adult lives, and because they have not learned to think of themselves as intellectually competent or economically responsible.   Many school dropouts quite literally have something better to do than spend their days in drab, depressing schools that offer little promise of success.

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Option 2: Retaining At-Risk Youth

The second basic policy option is to accept existing school
programs as more or less adequate and concentrate on strategies
that increase the likelihood that students will succeed within
them. As with the general program improvement option, this
option would begin with the development of an improved system for
identification of children whose background and current
performance indicates that they are substantially at-risk.
Responding to these identified children would follow a rather
different course, however.

In general, effective programs for at-risk youth have the
following characteristics:

o   Instructional groups are small.

o   There is substantial autonomy for teachers
     to adjust instruction and curriculum to
     fit specific student interests and needs.

o   Teachers have a strong "coaching" orientation
     and see themselves as responsible for student
     success, rather than simply for the delivery of
     planned instruction.

o   The instructional process is experimental, uses
     shorter than average terms, and awards limited
     credit for limited student achievement.

o   Accommodates special student conditions, such as
     pre-natal and child care for teen mothers.

Wehlage reports that "the single most valued characteristics of
the programs is the family atmosphere." Cooperative learning is
stressed and students are encouraged to assume responsibility for
their school related behavior.

Another significant dimension to the at-risk student
retention option is the development of specialized programs to
deal with the most disruptive risk factors -- pregnancy, drug and
alcohol abuse, absenteeism and truancy, failure and low
achievement. When, for example, about half of all girls who drop
out of school are pregnant, we cannot ignore the need for new
strategies of assistance to this special group. Parenting
skills, appropriate sex education, infant day-care, opportunities
for re-entry for young mothers, and a variety of similar programs
for reducing the impact of pregnancy would need to be a major
ingredient in any comprehensive dropout reduction program.
Similar special services to students with criminal records, drug
abuse problems, or other indications of serious social
maladjustments are also required.

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In addition to creating special programs for at-risk youth, retention policies would emphasize staff training in: techniques for recognition and handling of student alienation, constructive approaches to student discipline and, above all, stimulating innovative approaches to instruction of at-risk students.

Option 3: Enhancing Career and Vocational Education Programs

A third policy option is to concentrate on strengthening programs designed especially for students who are not benefiting from the general education emphasis of typical high school programs. This policy option means relinquishing the idea that at-risk students can progress through mainstream high school programs and moving, instead, to the development of career or vocational education programs designed to fit their special needs and interests. At present vocational education in the nation's secondary schools is truly at a crossroads. In a substantial number of schools career education and vocational training programs are second-rate educational efforts. Training programs frequently utilize obsolete equipment and train students in the use of out-of-date technologies.

To effectively pursue this option, schools would need funds to upgrade instructional services and programs for linking in-school training to on-the-job opportunities in local business and industry. Rather than encouraging students to take dead-end low skill jobs and insisting that they spend their school hours working on ineffective remedial courses in the basic skills, vocational and career education programs need to develop true partnerships with expanding industries and to re-vamp school programs so that they cover skills that have a clear relevance to expanded job opportunities for vocational trainees.

Staff changes would also be important in the pursuit of this policy option. To succeed, vocational programs need sensitive career counselors who are able to help students develop realistic aspirations for themselves and recognize the sorts of intellectual and social training that are necessary to fulfill those aspirations. Moreover, career counseling needs to begin with much younger students than is typically found in the schools. By the time they enter the ninth grade, students have already developed the basic ideas that will control their expectations regarding participation in the world of work. Students with inappropriate concepts about work or unrealistic ideas of their own capabilities or interests, are ripe for disappointment and disengagement from the educational process.

Summary

This paper examines the problem of early school exit by large numbers of high school students. A brief analysis of the

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extent and nature of the problem was followed by a discussion of strategies and policy options for trying to ameliorate the problem. The problem is serious and widespread, leading to huge economic and human losses to society.

Policy responses need to grapple with community, school, and individual student levels of change. Six specific strategies for action are identified:

    o Risk management
    o Environment improvement
    o Incentive system reform
    o Program innovation and change
    o Staff development and training, and
    o School culture improvement.

In combination, these six strategies could be used to pursue one of three basic policy options: 1) basic school program reform, 2) development of special programs for at-risk youth, or 3) reform and improvement of vocational and career education programs. The first option views dropping out of high school as a symptom of general weakness in the education system. Option two focuses on the special problems of the at-risk student group and builds programs to assist them in becoming successful. The third option assumes that the at-risk youth need educational opportunities that are fundamentally different from those made available to most high school students -- opportunities that will give them access to the job marke: by preparing them for unique social and work roles.

The three policy options discussed are not, of course, mutually exclusive. All three could be pursued simultaneously. They do, however, compete for very scarce educational resources, and certainly cannot all be pursued with vigor without doing serious damage to other educational goals.

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