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ABSTRACT

Strategies for reducing by one-half the school dropout rate in the southern United States are presented in this report. Sixteen recommendations made by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) are discussed. These involve the following general areas: setting local goals, focusing on student outcomes, improving the reporting system, and providing state leadership. A major conclusion offered is that reaching the dropout reduction goal requires state leadership initiatives that engage local leaders--in education, the community, and business--to higher levels of motivation, performance, and moral responsibility for successfully holding more students in school through graduation. Seven tables that illustrate regional educational and economic trends are included. (17 references) (LMI)

REACHING THE GOAL TO REDUCE THE DROPOUT RATE

Gene Bottoms and Alice Presson

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SREB

Southern Regional Education Board

FOREWORD

One of the key goals advanced by the Southern Regional Education Board in its 1988 report, *Goals for Education: Challenge 2000*, is that, by the year 2000, the school dropout rate will be reduced by one-half. Reaching this goal will be a major challenge. Why is reducing the dropout rate so important? Here are some implications of having one-third of the region's youth fail to complete high school:

- High school dropouts face an unemployment rate nearly double that for high school graduates.
- A large proportion of the inmates in the region's prisons are school dropouts.
- Families headed by dropouts are twice as likely as all families to have incomes below the poverty level. And, 22 percent of students from low income families will drop out, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.
- The high school graduation rate in 1988 for SREB states was approximately 69 percent.
- In 1989, the average annual income for a high school dropout is more than $3,000 less than that of a high school graduate.

To accomplish the regional and state goals to reduce the number of dropouts, this report indicates that focused and sustained efforts are needed at both the local school level and the state level to change schools. All schools must address those problems within their influence that prevent students from graduating from high school. This will involve doing some things differently at the local school level and providing leadership that focuses on incorporating permanent practices and strategies proven to promote meaningful school completion of at-risk students.

The importance of educating all the citizens of a state may have been best captured by one of the nation's greatest thinkers, Thomas Jefferson:

> *I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion.*

This report recommends the steps that must be taken to help insure that in the future the largest proportion possible of the region's citizens will be "enlightened" sufficiently to be successful in life and to use with discretion "the ultimate powers of society."

Mark D. Musick, President

REACHING THE GOAL TO REDUCE THE DROPOUT RATE

"I don't wanna go back to school today. I don't like it there. Ain't nobody interested in me, 'cept for Ms. Bennett. I'm gonna drop out anyway. Nobody likes me 'cause I'm ugly. I'm a alcoholic too. I can get a job in a prison—that's where I'll end up."

—Willie, a 16-year-old eighth grade student

Thousands of young people in SREB states share Willie's loss of faith in our schools. If the states in this region are to prosper, Willie and students like him must be reached. Young people, parents, educators, business leaders, policymakers in state and local government, and members of the public must act decisively to make these students aware of and appreciate the link between education and challenging, rewarding employment. The idea, of course, is to motivate all students to stay in school, at least until they complete the 12th grade.

Willie and students like him are the focus of one of the key goals advanced by the Southern Regional Education Board in its 1988 report, *Goals for Education: Challenge 2000.* **By the year 2000, the school dropout rate will be reduced by one-half.** Reaching this regional goal in every state will require focused and sustained efforts at both the local school level and the state level to remove barriers to high school graduation.

SREB RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REDUCING THE SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE

To cut the dropout rate in half by the year 2000, SREB state policymakers must actively address four areas:

- setting local as well as state goals for reducing the number of dropouts;
- getting local schools to focus on student outcomes;
- keeping score and reporting the results of dropout prevention efforts;
- providing state leadership in dropout prevention.

Setting Local Goals

SREB states have developed state goals for dropout reduction, but few require local school systems to establish such goals. If we reduce the regional dropout rate 50 percent by the year 2000, it will be because local educational and community leaders set a goal, aim for it, and reach it. The goal must be to retain students in school and provide them with the tools they need to lead a fruitful life as successful and productive citizens.

SREB recommends that:

- **States require local school districts to establish special goals for reducing dropout rates.**
- **States have local school districts set goals for raising the academic competencies of at-risk students in middle and early high school grades.**

Getting Local Schools to Focus on Student Outcomes

An adequate plan for dropout reduction will require local education and community leaders to work together to define and address the problem. The aim of the plan must be to: establish among educational leaders that the current dropout rate is no longer acceptable; build a knowledge base of proven practices for dropout prevention; provide state technical assistance on a continuing basis to local school districts adopting dropout prevention practices; advance the know-how for district and school-level leaders to address the dropout problem effectively and successfully while concurrently improving the academic achievement of potential dropouts; and help local schools operate as problem-solving organizations, taking the initiative to change their programs to improve outcomes.

SREB recommends that:

- **States promote a vision of how middle and secondary schools must change if more students are to complete high school.**
- **States require all school systems to develop dropout prevention plans at the school level for those clusters of middle and secondary schools with a dropout rate greater than the state's dropout goal for the year 2000. Plans should be approved by the State Department of Education.**
- **States focus on developing leadership at the school level to direct dropout prevention efforts.**

- **States establish a system of incentives and sanctions that encourage students to attend school and encourage unity of purpose among school faculty to successfully return at-risk students to the mainstream of education.**

Keeping Score and Reporting the Results

State policymakers must draw the public's attention to the seriousness of the dropout problem and keep it there. One state educational specialist responsible for dropout prevention has said it best: "If states want action at the building level to improve dropout prevention, then states must publish annually, by system and by school, information on attendance, chronic absenteeism, and the number of dropouts."

SREB recommends that:

- **All SREB states adopt the full definition for "dropout" proposed by the National Center for Education Statistics and prepare to participate in the data collection procedures for the 1991-92 school year.**
- **States develop a dropout information management system with capacity to determine who drops out and why.**
- **States assess progress of their dropout prevention programs by establishing a scorekeeping and annual reporting system on dropouts by district and by school.**

Providing State Leadership

Reaching the dropout reduction goal will require state initiatives that challenge local leaders—education, community, and business—to reach higher levels of motivation, performance, and moral responsibility for successfully holding more students in school through graduation. These initiatives must change the mind-set of local school teams. Presently, these attitudes often prevail: "We cannot reduce the dropout rate at our school because the students are poor; they speak another language at home; there are too many project kids." State leaders must help local school leaders address and surmount these attitudes. Until every school in the state is committed to a program of dropout prevention, significant reduction of dropout rates is likely to remain a dream.

SREB recommends that:

- **Each state develop a system for identifying potential dropouts in middle and secondary schools for the purpose of intervening to keep those students in school.**
- **States support research and evaluation efforts to determine the effectiveness of approaches for keeping at-risk youth in school and advancing their academic achievement.**
- **States create and empower an office or commission on dropout prevention.**
- **States use their funding resources—federal, state, and local—to promote a unified and comprehensive dropout prevention program.**
- **States establish on-site review teams who can evaluate progress and provide technical assistance to those schools in trouble.**
- **States require all youth to be enrolled in an "approved educational program" until age 18 or until they receive a diploma, whichever comes first.**

WHAT THE FUTURE WILL LOOK LIKE

If the SREB recommendations are followed, the future in the states within our region will look like this:

- **Every Local School Will Be a Problem-solving Organization.** Because dropouts are often invisible and most teachers are not aware of how many students are leaving and why, all educators will be fully aware of the dropout problem in their own school and will address every aspect of the problem in order to design a lasting solution. This will involve not only making a commitment to educate all youth until age 18, but diversifying the setting and the approach employed.

- **States Will Provide a Clear Focus on Schools with Greatest Need.** States will require special action plans at the school level for all clusters of middle and secondary schools with a dropout rate greater than the rate suggested in the state's dropout goal for the year 2000.

- **States Will Have a Strong Commitment to Accelerating Achievement of At-risk Students.** States will have an articulated vision of how middle and secondary schools must change if they are to have larger numbers of at-risk students receiving a meaningful high school diploma.

- **Local Schools Will Have Long Attention Spans and Will Concentrate on Outcomes.** Schools and school systems will no longer address the dropout problem in a highly fragmented manner over brief periods of time, adding and soon dropping some special new service as project funds become available and then expire. Instead, schools will have a focus on outcomes and will make changes as needed in their curriculum, instructional approaches, school climate, and organization to improve outcomes for at-risk students.

- **State and Local Leaders Will Understand the Characteristics of Effective Schools Serving Large Numbers of At-risk Students.** Because they need to know what works in keeping at-risk students in school and advancing their educational achievement, state and local policymakers will support a vigorous research and evaluation program of dropout prevention initiatives, and local districts will no longer adopt strategies with little or no evidence of their effectiveness.

- **Schools Will Commit Themselves to Molding Students' Attitudes and Values about Learning, Careers, Honesty, Reliability, Fairness, Respect for Others and Self.** School administrators and teachers will be attentive to school practices and outcomes over which they have some influence. State and local leaders will look beyond the reasons students give for leaving school and identify and address the factors which most often contribute to dropping out.

- **Schools Will Be Held Accountable to the People Who Depend on Their Performance—Parents, Students, Community and Business Leaders.** At a minimum, states will keep score on the dropout rate by system and by school and on academic achievement of at-risk students as measured by grades and achievement tests. They will publish an annual report that provides the above information by district and by school for the previous five years.

REACHING THE GOAL TO REDUCE THE DROPOUT RATE

"I don't wanna go back to school today. I don't like it there. Ain't nobody interested in me, 'cept for Ms. Bennett. I'm gonna drop out anyway. Nobody likes me 'cause I'm ugly. I'm a alcoholic too. I can get a job in a prison— that's where I'll end up."
Willie, a 16-year-old eighth grade student

Literally thousands of young people in SREB states share Willie's feelings about school. If the states in this region are to prosper, Willie and students like him must be reached. They and their parents, leaders in state and local government, education, business, and the public must be committed to decisive actions to make these students aware of and appreciate the link between education and challenging, rewarding employment. The idea, of course, is that this knowledge will motivate all students to stay in school, at least until completing high school.

Willie and students like him are the focus of one of the key goals advanced by the Southern Regional Education Board in its 1988 report, *Goals for Education: Challenge 2000.*

BY THE YEAR 2000—

The school dropout rate will be reduced by one-half.

Reaching this goal—significantly reducing the number of students who drop out of school each year—represents a major challenge in virtually every SREB state. Between 1982 and 1988, only two SREB states—Alabama and West Virginia—reported dropout rate reductions that, if extended to the year 2000, would result in accomplishing this goal. Dropout rates in eight states—Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas—declined so little that, at the same pace, the goal would not be reached. In Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia, the dropout rates increased.

Why is a major reduction in the dropout rate so important? Let some facts speak for themselves:

- In 1989, 1,660,000 people between the ages of 16 and 24 in the SREB states were dropouts. Statistics from the Bureau of Labor show that the average annual income for a high school dropout is $3,239 less than for a person graduating from high school. If all 1,660,000 of those dropouts had been working in 1989, that would amount to a loss of $5.38 billion in earning power.
- The Department of Labor reports that in 1989, high school dropouts faced an unemployment rate of 28.7 percent; the jobless rate for high school graduates was 14.7 percent.
- According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), black students are almost twice as likely as white students to drop out of school.
- At least 80 percent of the inmates in the nation's prisons are school dropouts. In one SREB state, only 11 percent of the prison population had a reading level of grade 12 or higher.
- Families headed by dropouts are twice as likely as all families to have incomes below the poverty level. And, 22 percent of students from low income families will drop out, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.
- The most recently published information reported by states to the U.S. Department of Education indicates that in 1988 the high school graduation rate for SREB states averaged 68.6 percent; the national average was 71.1 percent.
- A 1989 report by the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families states that if current trends continue, the number of at-risk children in the United States and in the SREB region will increase dramatically.

The number of students who drop out of school in a year influences high school graduation rates. If current high school graduation rates

are even remotely accurate and if SREB states continue to "brush off" the dropout problem, the chance of reaching the regional goal—reducing the school dropout rate by one-half—is slim.

Without a complete turnaround in the dropout flow, states will find themselves with a shortage of new front-line workers capable of being productive in the increasingly competitive international economy. And, states will find themselves with tax receipts inadequate to meet rising costs for welfare, prisons, and health services to support those who fail to receive an adequate education. To overcome this potential regional disaster, every state in the SREB region will need inspired public and private leaders who will treat this problem as the grave emergency it is.

As state and local leaders organize initiatives for dropout reduction, three concerns must be addressed. First, reducing the dropout rate and increasing the high school graduation rate involve more than simply keeping students in school until completion.

Schools must see that students at risk of dropping out gain the tools needed to lead a fruitful life as successful and productive citizens. The central focus of state and local dropout prevention plans must be to help potential dropouts achieve the academic goals established for all students. These students must develop their capacity for continued learning in either a work or educational setting. To accomplish this, local school administrators must make substantial long-term changes in the culture of the school that will help retain at-risk students; these administrators must not be satisfied with short-term externally funded projects whose activities cease when the funds are exhausted.

Second, the school dropout problem encompasses a host of problems that school-age youth encounter both in and out of school. To address the dropout problem successfully, school leaders must: identify the factors that turn students away from school and education; determine how to help students face these problems; and involve the school, home, and community in a plan of action to keep potential dropouts in school.

Third, educators often blame conditions external to the school, such as poverty or dysfunctional family life, as the conditions that cause young people to "give up on" school and drop out. An air of hopelessness often dominates local school leaders who may respond by wringing their hands, shaking their heads, and saying, "But what can we do about those things?" There are many things in a student's life of learning that the school can control in the time that the student spends at school, but first, many local educators will have to change their attitude regarding what schools can do to solve the dropout problem.

Schools Must Raise Academic Achievement of Potential Dropouts

State and local plans designed to reduce dropout rates will be incomplete unless they also focus on raising the academic achievement of potential dropouts. Of young adults between 18 and 23 years old, those with basic academic skills in the bottom fifth of their class when compared to their peers in the top half, are:

- 8.8 times more likely to have left school without a diploma;
- 8.6 times more likely to have had a child out of wedlock;
- 5.4 times more likely to be receiving some form of public assistance;
- 5.0 times more likely to be at poverty-level in income;
- 5.0 times more likely not to be enrolled in school;
- 3.6 times more likely to be neither working, nor taking care of a child;
- 2.2 times more likely to have been arrested *in the previous year.*

Source: *The Forgotten Half: Non-college Youth in America*. The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, January, 1988.

Political and educational leaders in most states, however, fall woefully short in formulating and executing a plan that links state resources and leadership with local educators and community leaders in a mutually supportive effort for achieving their stated goal. In particular, the following three shortcomings are noticeable:

- Most states do not have basic information on who drops out, when, and why.
- Strategies for focusing and maintaining the attention of public and professional educators on the problem for a decade do not exist in most states.
- Comprehensive plans are not in place in most states for implementing school-level practices to encourage students to stay in school and to eliminate practices that contribute to students dropping out.

This document gives a general snapshot of states' initiatives to reduce the dropout rate and offers 16 recommendations and some examples of the best practices for a comprehensive state attack to close the gap—to reduce the dropout rate by one-half and achieve the regional goal by the year 2000. A 1990 survey of SREB State Departments of Education and telephone interviews of SREB state dropout prevention coordinators reveal that while a few states do perform many of these activities, most SREB states, as yet, perform only a few. Currently, no SREB state has a functioning dropout prevention system that includes all 16 recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REDUCING THE SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE

To reduce the dropout rate in SREB states one-half by the year 2000, state policymakers must establish and maintain public attention on the seriousness of the dropout problem. Policymakers must demand that there is a state system for knowing who the state's dropouts are and what kind of progress is being made in keeping students in school. State policy leaders must insist that plans for reaching the state goal be formulated and carried out. Decisive actions are essential.

1 *SREB recommends that states require local school districts to establish special goals for reducing dropout rates.*

All SREB states have developed goals for reducing the school dropout rate (Table 1). Six states—Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia—have goals that call for reducing the dropout rate by one-half. The goal in Arkansas is to reduce the dropout rate by 90 percent by the year 2000.

Louisiana, Maryland, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia have expressed their state goals in terms of high school completion. Maryland's goal is also different in that it is not stated in quantifiable terms. Florida and Texas have established state goals for reducing the dropout rate to four percent and five percent, respectively, several years before the year 2000.

SREB states have developed state goals for dropout reduction, but few require local school systems to establish such goals. If the regional dropout rate is to be reduced by one-half by the year 2000, it will be because local educational and community leaders set a goal, aim for it, and reach it. Local systems with a specific goal are likely to have a plan in operation and to reach their goal. SREB believes that it is essential to extend the dropout reduction goal-setting process to local school districts and communities.

Table 1
SREB STATE GOALS FOR REDUCING THE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE AND DEVELOPMENT OF STATE PLANS OF ACTION

States	Goal	Has State Plan of Action Been Developed?
Alabama	To reduce the number of dropouts to 2,000 by the year 2000.	Yes
Arkansas	To reduce the dropout rate by 90% by the year 2000.	Being developed
Florida	To reduce the dropout rate to 4% or less by 1995.	Yes
Georgia	To reduce the dropout rate by one-half.	Being developed
Kentucky	To reduce the dropout rate by one-half by the year 2000.	Yes
Louisiana	Expressed in terms of high school completion: By the year 2000, 80% or more of Louisiana high school students will graduate with a regular high school diploma.	Being developed
Maryland	95% of Maryland's students will achieve a high school diploma and will be prepared for postsecondary education, employment, or both.	No
Mississippi	To reduce the school dropout rate by one-half by the year 2001.	Yes
North Carolina	To reduce by one-half the dropout rate in every school district.	Yes
Oklahoma	At least 90 percent of students entering first grade each year will ultimately graduate from high school.	No
South Carolina	To reduce the dropout rate by one-half by the year 2000.	Being developed
Tennessee	Expressed in terms of high school completion: By the year 2000, the statewide graduation rate shall be at least 85%.	Yes
Texas	To reduce dropout rate by 5% by 1997-98.	Yes
Virginia	No school division shall have a dropout rate higher than the present statewide average and the present average will be reduced by one-half by the year 2000.	Yes
West Virginia	Expressed in terms of high school completion: By the year 2000, the percentage of students who graduate will increase to 90%.	Being developed

SOURCES: State Departments of Education, SREB March 1990 Survey, Gale F. Gaines, *Educational Goals in SREB States*, SREB, 1990

2 *SREB recommends that states have local school districts set goals for raising the academic competencies of at-risk students in middle and early high school grades.*

Reducing the dropout rate or increasing the graduation rate will not eliminate the growing gap between "haves" and "have nots." States and local districts must also develop specific goals for raising the basic and academic competencies of at-risk students and for assessing their success, so that all high school graduates will be capable of further learning on the job or in a postsecondary institution. Current tracking and remediation practices serve to lower expectations and achievement of at-risk students.

As the schools improve academic achievement of middle and high school students, dropout rates

will fall and more students will be completing a meaningful high school program. Some SREB states have taken actions to encourage students to meet higher standards. For example, all SREB states have identified student achievement goals, such as:

- Elevating elementary and secondary achievement to levels that meet or exceed national averages and are competitive with other developed countries;
- Increasing the percentage of students taking algebra or applied algebra;
- Increasing enrollment in and completion of upper-level science and/or mathematics courses;
- Reducing the achievement gap between disadvantaged high school students and those who are not disadvantaged;
- Improving promotion rates in grades 9 through 12; and
- Improving high school graduation rates.

SREB states and local communities, however, have not set goals specifically directed to at-risk students. States and local school districts need to develop a specific goal for raising the basic academic competencies of at-risk students and to create programs for tracking at-risk students' success. School must help potential dropouts develop a dream for their future that includes a vision of themselves as successful working members of society. To break the poverty cycle and its tight lock on many potential dropouts requires ensuring that they stay in school, receive a high school diploma that means something, and prepare for further learning and employment.

3 ***SREB recommends that all SREB states adopt the full definition for "dropout" proposed by the National Center for Education Statistics and prepare to participate in the data collection procedures for the 1991-92 school year.***

States can neither solve the dropout problem nor document their progress until educators at the school level know how many students drop out, who they are, why, and when those students drop out. These basic questions cannot be answered, nor comparisons made within and between states, until a common definition of the term "dropout" and a uniform method for collecting and reporting information on dropouts are used across the region.

The public is confused by the conflicting reports and the various ways dropouts are reported. A look at three different reporting methods reveals three different rates for the Southern region.

Data collected by the *High School and Beyond* study (HSB) suggest that 17 percent of the 1980 sophomore class in the nation did not remain in school through graduation (The National Opinion Research Center, 1986). For the Southern region, 19.5 percent of the 1980 sophomores did not graduate (National Center for Education Statistics, 1988).

The U.S. Bureau of the Census reported most recently that more than four percent of all students in grades 10 through 12 dropped out annually (ibid.). Over three years, that would translate roughly into a rate of 13 percent for a group of students as they move between the tenth grade and graduation in the twelfth grade.

The variation between the figures reported from HSB data and the Census data suggests further difficulty in securing a useful understanding of how many students drop out. While these rates are helpful because they provide a general picture of the severity of the dropout problem for the country, there are problems with these data sources. First, HSB data provide information for a single group of students. Subsequent data collections would have enabled researchers to identify trends over time. Second, both data sources are collected on students in grades 10 through 12. The literature indicates, however, that high dropout rates occur in the ninth grade and earlier. Finally, neither of those sources provides information on dropout rates by states.

Enrollment data and graduation rates reported by public schools to the U.S. Department of Education also shed light on the dropout problem. Graduation rates reported on the annual "Wall Chart" are calculated by dividing the number of high school graduates in a given year by the ninth-grade enrollments four years earlier, with adjustments made for interstate migration. According to this source, in 1982, the graduation rate in SREB states ranged from 53 percent to 75 percent. By 1988, graduation rates in most SREB states had increased somewhat, ranging from 58 percent to 77 percent (Table 2).

Many people look at the graduation rates listed on the "Wall Chart" and assume that a dropout rate can be calculated by subtracting a graduation rate from 100. The "Wall Chart," however, was never intended to provide dropout rates and does not contain the necessary data for calculating such rates.

Table 2
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES FOR SREB STATES 1982, 1987, and 1988[1]

States	1982	1987	1988
Alabama	63.4%	70.2%	74.9%
Arkansas	73.4	77.5	77.2
Florida[2]	60.2	58.6	58.0
Georgia	65.0	62.5	61.0
Kentucky	65.9	67.4	69.0
Louisiana	52.9	60.1	61.4
Maryland	74.8	74.5	74.1
Mississippi	61.3	64.8	66.9
North Carolina	67.1	67.8	66.7
Oklahoma	70.8	72.6	71.7
South Carolina	63.8	66.9	64.6
Tennessee	67.8	67.8	69.3
Texas	63.6	65.1	65.3
Virginia	73.8	74.0	71.6
West Virginia	66.3	76.2	77.3

[1]Graduation rates are for public schools only. The adjusted rates are calculated by dividing the number of public high school graduates by the public ninth grade enrollment four years earlier. Ninth-grade enrollments include a prorated portion of the secondary school students who are unclassified by grade. Graduation rates are also corrected for interstate population migration.

[2]U.S. Department of Education notes that Florida uses different information for determining the graduation rate than that used by other states in the rates reported here.

SOURCES: State Departments of Education, SREB March 1990 survey, and U.S. Department of Education, *State Education Performance Chart*, 1982-1988 and 1982-1989.

The advantage of the "Wall Chart" is that it reports graduation by states; the disadvantage is that the definition of "graduate" and the methods of collecting the information vary from state-to-state. Furthermore, the graduation rates in some states do not include the number of persons of graduating age receiving a "GED" diploma through the General Educational Development program. Until states adopt uniform practices in determining the dropout rate, it is likely that many policymakers will continue to make decisions based on figures from the "Wall Chart."

Until recently, many SREB states did not have a state definition for "dropout." Today, 13 SREB states have established a state definition of dropout (Table 3). The definitions vary, however, from state to state and, for the most part, occur because of variations in the definition of "school year" and in reasons for excluding students from the dropout count. Examples of variations include:

- Some states do not count as dropouts persons who transfer to private vocational schools, job training, or similar educational programs that do not provide certification equivalent to a high school diploma.
- West Virginia counts as dropouts all students who transfer to any GED program.
- Arkansas considers students who transfer to a part-time GED program as dropouts; Texas does not.
- Florida only considers as dropouts those students who are not over the age of compulsory school attendance when they leave school.
- Maryland and Mississippi require systems to report dropouts during the enrollment period from the first of June to the last of May; other states report from September 1 through August 31.
- Oklahoma does not count as dropouts students who are over 18 years of age when they leave school.
- Texas does not consider as dropouts students who have been enrolled in a district for less than 30 consecutive days when they leave school.

By carefully wording the definition of school

Table 3
DATA COLLECTION ON DROPOUTS IN SREB STATES

States	Participation in NCES Field Test	State Information Management System to Follow Students Through the System	State Definition of Dropout Exists and Applies to All School Systems
Alabama	Yes	Yes	Yes
Arkansas	Yes	No	No
Florida	Yes	Being developed	Yes
Georgia	Yes	Being developed	Yes
Kentucky	No	Developed but awaiting funding	No
Louisiana	Yes	Being developed	Yes
Maryland	Yes	Being developed	Yes
Mississippi	Yes	Being developed	Yes
North Carolina	Yes	Yes	Yes
Oklahoma	Yes	No	Yes
South Carolina	No	Yes	Yes
Tennessee	No	Being developed	Yes
Texas	No	Yes	Yes
Virginia	No	Being developed	Yes
West Virginia	No	Yes	Yes

SOURCE: State Departments of Education, SREB March 1990 Survey

dropout, a state can easily present information to the public that shows a lower dropout rate than that of another state; in fact, the rate might be considerably higher if both states were to use the same definition of "dropout" and the same data collection procedures. Until the facts about dropout rates are known, states cannot spark public outrage about the dropout problem or create consensus among local educators and community leaders on the need to address the problem.

The United States Department of Education, through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), has undertaken a major effort to develop a common definition of "dropout" and a uniform method for collecting dropout information. Currently, only three SREB states—Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina—use the National Center for Education Statistics method of data collection and defining dropouts; other states use parts of the NCES definition.

A standard definition would enable state officials to compare their dropout rates with other states and would facilitate tracking of students who migrate between states. Nine SREB states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Oklahoma—are participating in an NCES field test (Table 3). While a state may be participating in the field test, not all school districts may be involved.

The NCES-proposed definition of dropout would solve the problems of when to collect or report the data, what a high school dropout is, and what a state- or district- approved program is. Full-time GED students would not be counted as dropouts. All SREB states need to make plans now to adopt fully the NCES definition of dropout and data collection procedures and begin using the system for the entire state for the 1991-92 school year.

NCES-Proposed Definition of Dropout

A dropout is an individual who:

- was enrolled in school at some time during the previous year;
- was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year;
- has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved educational program; and
- does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions:
  —transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district- approved education program;
  —temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved illness; or
  —death.

For the purposes of this definition, the following clarifications are made:

- A school year is the 12-month period of time beginning with the normal opening of school in the fall;
- An individual has graduated from high school or completed an approved education program upon receipt of formal recognition from school authorities;
- A state- or district-approved program may include special education programs, home-based instruction, and school-sponsored GED preparation, if enrolled full- time.

SREB recommends that states develop a dropout information management system with capacity to determine who drops out and why.

To determine the extent of the dropout problem and to design solutions, the information management system states adopt must do three things: determine the state dropout rates by school district and by school; describe students who drop out; and determine why students drop out.

Determining dropout rates by school district and school. An information management system will require that schools collect and report information. Dropout prevention involves paperwork. Even at the school building level, dropouts are invisible and most teachers are not aware of how many students are leaving and why. Only when all educators in every school are fully aware of the dropout problem in their own school will the combined efforts of educators reach a solution to the problem. At a recent SREB meeting on dropout prevention, a school superintendent from North Carolina said:

My secondary teachers did not believe we had a dropout problem until we documented the number who had dropped out over a 12-month period and the reason for leaving. At first, teachers really did not believe the figures. They said we counted some folks twice. By compiling dropout information and sharing it with teachers, we were able to make them aware of the problem and get them involved in its solution. Now we prepare a comparative dropout report annually and share it so faculty can see our progress or lack of progress. For us, this is an effective way to keep the faculty involved in developing strategies for further reducing the dropout rate.

Determining who drops out. If educators could accurately describe dropouts from each school, they would be better able to predict which students are at risk of dropping out in the future. Several school, personal, and home factors appear to be related to students' dropping out of school. SREB recommends that a state management information system be designed to collect

information on those factors identified by the current research literature on dropping out. To calculate dropout rates for particular groups, states must also collect information on the school enrollment for each grade level by those characteristics identified with dropping out of school.

SREB states vary greatly in their capacity to provide this information.

- All SREB states, except Kentucky, have indicated that by 1991 they will be able to provide information on dropouts by race/ethnicity and gender. Developing the system in each state is contingent upon funding.
- Nine states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia—have information on the grade level of dropouts.
- Only Kentucky and Virginia report that they currently collect information at the state level on individual student absenteeism.
- None of the SREB states report knowing what proportion of students enrolled in their schools are chronically absent from grade to grade.
- Ten SREB states can determine the dropout rate by race; 14 states can determine the dropout rate by sex (Table 4).
- Only five states—Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, and North Carolina—require that academic achievement of "at-risk" students be reported, even though educators often cite academic failure and/or poor grades as factors which put students at risk of dropping out (Table 5).
- Only Alabama and Texas report that they have in place a state management system to follow students through school.

Table 4
AVAILABILITY OF STATE INFORMATION ON 1988–89 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES, BY RACE AND GENDER

SREB States	Race	Gender
Alabama	yes	yes
Arkansas	yes	yes
Florida	yes	yes
Georgia	no	yes
Kentucky	no	yes
Louisiana	yes	yes
Maryland	no	no
Mississippi	no	yes
North Carolina	yes	yes
Oklahoma	yes	yes
South Carolina	no	yes
Tennessee	yes	yes
Texas	yes	yes
Virginia	yes	yes
West Virginia	yes	yes

SOURCE: State Departments of Education, SREB March 1990 Survey

Information that State Management Information Systems Should Provide

Personal Factors

- race/ethnicity
- gender
- age, in relationship to classmates
- pregnancies
- drug or alcohol dependency

School Factors

- school attendance
- reading and mathematics achievement
- school discipline problems
- school grades
- highest grade level attained
- number of times retained in same grade

Home Factors

- family status (single parent, etc.)
- parents' educational level
- language spoken at home
- family income
- educational attainment of siblings

Determining why students drop out. The above factors may provide a portrait of students who typically leave school, but if school administrators can learn the specific reasons for their own students dropping out of school, then they can design and target appropriate interventions for potential dropouts. To discover what is provoking the behavior of the dropout requires asking why he or she is leaving school and probing beyond the stated reason to verify whether this is the real reason. States must help schools develop the capacity to gather this information and determine the primary cause for the student's departure.

States should require schools to hold an exit interview with all students who leave school to determine why they left, who talked with them before they decided to leave, what the school could have done to encourage them to stay, and what their plans are for the future. This information should be compiled and analyzed at the local and state levels.

Henry Levin suggests that there are some aspects of school itself that may prompt students to leave (Levin, 1990). For instance, the tendency of schools to remediate "low-achievers," rather than accelerate them, may have a strong impact on a student's decision to leave. School administrators and teachers must be attentive to school practices over which they have some influence. State and local leaders must look beyond the reasons students give for leaving school and begin to identify and address these factors which most often contribute to dropping out, including:

- lack of home support and encouragement to remain and succeed in school;
- failure to provide the personal attention and extra instructional support needed to succeed;
- failure to help potential dropouts see a connection between school and work;
- low expectations of dropouts on the part of many people who think that potential dropouts do not have what it takes to learn;
- failure to provide at-risk students with a consistent, stable, and nurturing school environment over a long period of time;
- the absence of a curriculum that is worthwhile and relevant for at-risk students; and
- the reluctance of local business, community, and educational leaders to demand changes in a school system that fails to educate through high school at least 25 to 40 percent of its youth.

Collaboration of Community and School Leaders Is Essential

Education, business, and community leaders in a small city in one SREB state refused to tolerate any longer the fact that large numbers of students were leaving school to work in the area's carpet mills. When a local businessman who employed some 500 workers was urged to consider the long-term economic impact of having employed a large proportion of unskilled workers who had dropped out of school, he realized that such a work force, armed with only rote skills, was a great financial liability. His workers needed to know how to read, to do math, and to operate computers. He took the matter to the Chamber of Commerce and found that other business leaders had similar concerns. The entire community and business responded in an overwhelming way.

What resulted was the establishment of a dropout prevention program in which 90 percent of the businesses in the area agreed not to hire dropouts and to promote high school completion. Not only were some businesses giving bonus checks to a worker when his or her child graduated from high school, some businesses began to offer GED programs at the business sites to encourage more workers to complete their schooling.

When the administrator leading the effort left the school system, support from central office administrators and businesses dwindled dramatically. Consequently, dropout rates began to rise again, as well as the employment of dropouts in the mills.

Success in West Virginia

Since 1968, West Virginia has required local school officials to conduct exit interviews of all dropouts to find out why they are leaving school. Each school must tabulate the number of students dropping out, provide demographic information on those dropouts, compile the reasons for leaving, and report the information to the state. West Virginia has had a steady decline in its dropout rates for the past 15 years. The state dropout prevention coordinator has indicated that the required exit interviews and the compiling and reporting of information at the building level helped local educators become more alert to practices that would keep students in school.

5 *SREB recommends that states assess progress of their dropout prevention programs by establishing a scorekeeping and annual reporting system on dropouts by district and by school.*

School systems and schools will become concerned with dropout prevention when states start to keep score on how they are doing and make the score a part of the public record. Policymakers need current data to make decisions on how to target dropout interventions and how to distribute dropout prevention funds so that schools with the greatest problems receive the necessary assistance. At a minimum, SREB believes that states should keep score on: the dropout rate by system and by school, attendance rates of at-risk students by system and school, and academic achievement of at risk-students as measured by grades and achievement tests. This means publishing an annual report that provides the above information by district and by school for the previous five years.

Currently, most SREB states publicly report the number of dropouts only by system, and they do not report attendance rates and academic achievement of at-risk students by system and school (Tables 5 and 6). West Virginia is the only SREB state that has reported the dropout rate annually for each of the state's 55 county school systems since the 1968-69 school year.

By state statutory requirement, since 1989 Texas has been publishing a dropout report by January 31 of each odd-numbered year. This report lists the number of dropouts by race/ethnicity and grade for each school district in Texas and gives the fall enrollment of that year. Future reports on dropouts in Texas will include information on age, sex, socioeconomic status, and highest grade level completed.

An annual report will do two things. First, it will identify the clusters of schools and systems with the greatest problems. Second, it will identify those schools and systems that are making the most progress in reducing their dropout rates.

This information would enable state research and evaluation specialists to process information.

Table 5
REPORTING OF ATTENDANCE AND ACHIEVEMENT DATA ON "AT-RISK" STUDENTS IN SREB STATES

States	Reporting of Attendance Rates Required	Reporting of Academic Achievement Required
Alabama	yes	yes
Arkansas	no	no
Florida	yes	yes
Georgia	no	yes
Kentucky	yes	yes
Louisiana	fdc	fdc
Maryland	no	no
Mississippi	—	—
North Carolina	yes	yes
Oklahoma	no	no
South Carolina	no	no
Tennessee	no	no
Texas	—	—
Virginia	fdc	fdc
West Virginia	yes	—

" – " = Not reported; "fdc" = Future data collection
SOURCE: State Departments of Education, SREB March 1990 Survey

report findings, and evaluate state and local school district progress toward goals of reducing the dropout rate. At present, states are making limited use of the existing information base to draw attention to the dropout problem. A scorekeeping system would focus public attention on establishing state and local goals for reducing the dropout rate and determining progress toward those goals.

Table 6
COLLECTING AND REPORTING INFORMATION ON DROPOUTS

SREB States	Does the state collect information on dropout rates from school districts?	Does the state report information on dropouts by district and school?
Alabama	yes	yes
Arkansas	yes	all districts and most schools
Florida	yes	yes[1]
Georgia	yes	district only[2]
Kentucky	yes	district only
Louisiana	yes	yes
Maryland	yes	district only
Mississippi	yes	district only
North Carolina	yes	district only
Oklahoma	yes	all districts and some schools
South Carolina	yes	district only
Tennessee	yes	district only
Texas	yes	district only
Virginia	yes	district only
West Virginia	yes	district only

SOURCE: State Departments of Education, SREB March 1990 Survey

[1]Florida reports information on dropouts by local schools only for grades 9-12

[2]Georgia has the capability to report information on dropouts by local school upon request

At a recent SREB meeting, the chairman of a Senate Education Committee made the following case for keeping and making the dropout score public:

The public is much smarter and more aware of issues than educators give it credit for being. If you keep the public ignorant of the dropout problem, it will not support increased funding or needed changes. If you inform people about the problem, they will become involved in finding a solution. Educators, however, often try to hide the problem, rather than expose it and rally public support for solving it.

6 *SREB recommends that each state develop a system for identifying potential dropouts in middle and secondary schools for the purpose of intervening to keep those students in school.*

While no SREB state currently has specific procedures for identifying potential dropouts, Louisiana is developing a state system to identify and to monitor students who are at-risk of dropping out. North Carolina has derived a list of characteristics commonly found among dropouts and requires all school systems to develop their own early identification techniques and programs of assistance. At present, no state is requiring all schools to use common criteria for identifying potential dropouts.

The research literature on dropouts reveals a number of factors that are predictors of dropping out. One of the strongest predictors is failing one or more grade levels. In fact, each year that a student fails to advance to the next grade level increases his/her chance of dropping out by more than 40 percent. Given this, a student who has

Only Two SREB States Have a Definition for "Chronically or Excessively Absent"

Louisiana defines excessively absent as "having missed 5 days of school for those schools operating on a semester basis or 10 days of school for those schools not operating on a semester basis." There are exceptions allowed for possible extenuating circumstances dealing with health, natural disasters, and prior approval of travel for education. (Louisiana Bulletin 741, R.S. 1.055.04.)

Maryland uses the term "habitually truant" to describe "a student who has been unlawfully absent from school for a number of days or portion of days in excess of 20 percent of the school days within any marking period, semester, or year." A local school system has the prerogative of defining habitual truancy in a more, but not less, stringent manner (for example, unlawful absences in excess of 15 percent of the school days). (SREB Survey of State Departments of Education, March 1990.)

fallen two grade levels behind peers before going to high school is predicted to drop out, even if no other risk factors exist.

All SREB states report that high absenteeism also characterizes many high school dropouts. Although many SREB states agree with findings published by the National Center on Education Statistics that "a powerful predictor of whether a student would eventually drop out is the attendance record during the first four months of the tenth grade," only Louisiana and Maryland have indicated that they have a state definition of chronically or excessively absent. None of the SREB states report knowing what proportion of students enrolled in their schools are chronically absent between grades 1 and 4, 5 and 8, or 9 and 12.

SREB states need to develop a system for identifying potential dropouts that local systems can use in developing interventions needed to keep them in school. This process must provide for continuous monitoring so that potential dropouts are recognized whenever events put them at risk. The identification process should also include information on the following factors suggested by current research:

- Retained in the same grade one or more years
- Chronic absenteeism
- Failing grades or a low grade point average
- Difficulties with reading and school work in general
- Extenuating circumstances, such as pregnancy, drug or alcohol dependency
- School discipline problems
- From economically disadvantaged families
- Parent who failed to complete high school
- Older siblings who have dropped out
- From broken homes/single parent families

Early identification and prevention programs that identify students on academic and non-academic factors and use a range of intervention strategies are more successful with at-risk students than those that limit their identification to academics and use only a remedial approach to correct educational deficits, according to Slavin, Karweit, and Madden (1989). Schools must monitor the attendance and academic progress of these students through graduation and provide the extra help and attention they may need at appropriate times to succeed in regular, rather than remedial, courses.

7 *SREB recommends that states support research and evaluation efforts to determine effective approaches for keeping at-risk youth in school and advancing their academic achievement.*

State and local policymakers need to know what works in keeping at-risk students in school and advancing their educational achievement. Without a vigorous research and evaluation

A Unified State Dropout Prevention Plan Should Contain:

- A common goal:
- A common framework of strategies and a common set of performance indicators for evaluating all initiatives:
- A central information clearinghouse for all dropout prevention initiatives:
- A means for reporting annually the composite accomplishments and progress in dropout prevention.

program of dropout prevention initiatives, local districts will persist in adopting strategies with little or no evidence of their effectiveness. States must encourage local school districts to try a variety of plausible alternatives—from traditional single-focus programs to serious efforts that encompass curricular, instructional, and organizational changes in schools serving many at-risk students.

Little will be gained by throwing large sums of funds at "dropout prevention" that is not directed toward positive results. The real pay-offs will occur when states use their money to determine, through rigorous external evaluation practices, what works and to help school districts adopt valid practices.

A successful dropout information management system should enable the state to conduct comparative case studies of four or five schools with exceedingly high dropout rates and four or five schools with exceedingly low rates, while matching the schools in student demographics and other school characteristics. The purpose would be to sort out practices that seem to make a difference. Most states are not yet doing that.

Only North Carolina has reported a study to identify the characteristics of schools with successful dropout prevention programs (Kibel, 1988). The study found that:

- Administrators placed a high priority on dropout prevention.
- There was an ongoing process of setting goals, solving problems, mobilizing resources, implementing goals, and evaluating and reporting progress.
- Frequent direct counseling was provided for "at-risk" students.
- Comprehensive learning centers were established where students who were weak in reading or math could work on improving their skills.
- Strong vocational education programs provided an environment in which students had a sense of belonging and found opportunities for success.
- Counseling was an important part of in-school suspension programs.
- Fewer students worked outside of school.

Although few have done so, SREB states need to fund research and development projects aimed at bringing about change in schools that serve many at-risk students. Projects should develop instructional approaches that are appropriate for low achievers who are older students and will accelerate the progress of at-risk students by reaching them through higher level academic courses.

In its *Target 2000* effort, South Carolina provided $4 million in 1989-90 for 27 projects to develop and pilot-test strategies for assisting potential dropouts and bringing dropouts back to school. At the completion of these three-year projects, the successful strategies will form a "pool" of ideas that work and can be incorporated into local districts' comprehensive dropout prevention plans. The project sites will also become in-state laboratories for districts to visit as they proceed with their plans. Louisiana is funding projects for school systems to design various interventions to reduce the number of dropouts.

Each SREB state department of education should form partnerships with institutions of higher education to create a knowledge base of practices that work in keeping at-risk students in school and in advancing their achievement.

8 *SREB recommends that states create and empower an office or commission on dropout prevention.*

All states have a designated dropout prevention coordinator, but these coordinators have neither the charge nor organizational clout to develop and implement a unified strategy. In most states, dropout activities are distributed among several state agencies that operate independently. Too often the coordinator is at a low level, has multiple responsibilities, and no staff. The person responsible for state dropout prevention efforts must be in a position to help local schools with needed technical assistance and guidance, to effect plans for changes within schools , and to elicit the assistance of other professionals from a variety of agencies to work with local school districts.

All SREB states indicate that they have programs other than those specifically directed to dropout prevention for "at-risk" populations. These are often administered through the governor's office, labor department, employment commission, transportation or highway department, department of human resources or services, the judicial system, finance department, or health department. Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Kentucky, and West Virginia indicate that at least three or more other state offices conduct activities that involve potential dropouts.

The degree of involvement and commitment to dropout prevention of these other offices varies considerably among the SREB states. No SREB state is effectively involving all the state agencies with potential for helping at-risk students in the development of a unified state plan (SREB Survey of State Departments of Education, 1990).

Each SREB state should have a designated office or commission of dropout prevention with sufficient clout and visibility for successfully focusing on:

- Developing a unified state dropout prevention plan;
- Sustaining public attention on the issue through the decade of the '90s;
- Connecting more effectively the series of fragmented initiatives;
- Making maximum use of discretionary resources; and
- Engaging significant political, educational, and private sector leaders in dropout reduction.

Although SREB states may not yet have effective and unified dropout prevention plans, some exemplary state-level efforts are occurring. Many efforts, however, represent a piecemeal approach rather than a comprehensive state strategy. The following vignettes demonstrate the wide array of programs now found in the region. The activities show statewide concern for and involvement in dropout prevention and the use of a variety of state resources. These are programs that all SREB states could develop without extra state funding.

Summer Study and Work at Colleges in Texas. For six years the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has been operating the Youth Opportunities Unlimited Program, which places 14- and 15-year-old potential dropouts on college campuses for 60 days during the summer. The students are given credit for four hours of daily academic instruction, receive career and educational counseling, and earn money for part-time work on campus.

This program, which served 1,862 Texas youths and operated on 20 Texas campuses in 1990, is funded through the federal Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). Studies indicate that most of these students complete high school and many even attend college. Besides giving special attention to seriously at-risk students, the program includes a "Parents' Weekend" during which the students' parents attend sessions on how to promote school achievement and develop other skills contributing to school success.

This kind of collaborative program supports the

findings of Sipe, Grossman, and Milliner (1987) that an intensive summer instructional program can provide academic achievement benefits for at-risk secondary students. It is the kind of program that can be duplicated in all SREB states.

Alabama's Early Warning Truancy Program. After a state task force survey found that truancy was the most frequently reported reason for dropping out, the Alabama Department of Education, in cooperation with the Administrative Office of Courts, established an early warning program that provides early intervention in truancy problems.

In cooperation with juvenile authorities, each education agency electing to participate in the program develops policies and procedures conforming to state law and recommends them to the board of education for adoption. The policies identify the role and responsibilities of courts and schools and govern the operation of the early warning program. Alabama law requires that students with unexcused absences be reported weekly to the local superintendent and stipulates that the superintendent require an attendance officer to investigate cases of non-enrollment or absences. Prior to implementing the program, publicity garners support from the community and advises parents and students of the program.

Although it may vary from system to system, generally the early warning programs follow a four-step process:

- After the first truancy, the student is counseled by the homeroom teacher or principal.
- After the second truancy, the school notifies the parents or guardians of the student's unexcused absence and of the procedures that will be followed in the event that other unexcused absences occur.
- After the third unexcused absence, the student's parents or guardians must participate in the early warning program provided by the juvenile court at the county courthouse in the judge's chambers. If a student and parents fail to appear before the judge, a complaint or petition is filed against the child and/or parents.
- After a fourth unexcused absence, a complaint or petition is filed against the child and/or parents.

West Virginia's Commitment to Dropout Prevention as a Priority for All State Educators. In May of 1990, West Virginia's Department of Health and Human Services held a Children's Summit Meeting to focus on the problem of at-risk students and possible solutions to it. In a series of town meetings conducted the summer of the same year, the issue of keeping at-risk students in school emerged as a major concern.

In fall 1990, the governor appointed a Cabinet on Children and Families, which includes the heads of all state agencies dealing with children or families, to assure that the state provides comprehensive services to at-risk children. Furthermore, the State Superintendent of Education has stated that the goal is for all children in West Virginia—including all at-risk students—to graduate from high school. As a result, dropout prevention is a priority for all program managers within the State Department of Education.

To achieve the goal, West Virginia is coordinating the activities of many state agencies that provide services and help to potential dropouts; keeping score by county and publishing an annual report on dropout rates; using JTPA and other funds to provide interventions for most potential dropouts; and tracking school attendance in accordance with the state law requiring that students between 15 and 18 must be enrolled in school to have a driver's license.

Kentucky's Public Awareness Campaign Involving the Private Sector. Kentucky's governor has proclaimed one week in April as Dropout Prevention Focus Week, during which the Kentucky Department of Education, the Kentucky Grocers Association, and shopping centers throughout Kentucky sponsor "Project Care." This public service program is designed to create public awareness of the problems of students who drop out; to increase students' understanding of the relationship between academic and marketable skills and the working world; and to orient students on available job opportunities.

Local dropout prevention coordinators work with local businesses in distributing promotional items and information and hosting a career aware-

ness day for at-risk youth. On Career Awareness Day, students are assigned to jobs that give them a first-hand view of how businesses function. Job assignments are described, employer expectations outlined, and students are evaluated at the end of the day. Businesses receive literature on the extent of the dropout problem in Kentucky, things they can do to promote school completion, and the benefits of a well-educated work force.

North Carolina's Business Partnership Program. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has endorsed a collaborative business/school effort in which businesses employ potential dropouts and encourage them to complete school.

The business, participating students, and school representatives sign a contract. The business agrees to limit students' working hours so that the job does not interfere with school work. Schools recommend selected potential dropouts who are 16 or older for employment. Students who are hired are eligible for the benefits and advancement opportunities available to all part-time employees. Students must remain in school, meet the school's attendance requirements, and perform satisfactorily on the job to continue employment. The state provides staff training for school personnel to develop the program at the local level.

9 *SREB recommends that states use their funding resources—federal, state, and local—to promote a unified and comprehensive dropout prevention program.*

Providing financial resources to assist school systems in developing dropout prevention programs clearly serves as an indicator of the importance the state attaches to dropout prevention and as an incentive to stimulate activities that can help reduce the number of dropouts at the local level.

The amount of annual funds that flow into dropout prevention efforts and the distribution of such funds vary among the SREB states. Four states annually earmark between $49 million and $400 million specifically for dropout prevention; six states, however, do not earmark any funds specifically for dropout prevention efforts. Because data is not comparable, it is difficult to determine if there is a relationship between the level of special state funding in dropout prevention and the progress states are making to reduce dropout rates.

SREB states distribute funds for dropout prevention efforts in several ways. The most common way has been through competitive grants awarded to local districts submitting funding proposals for dropout prevention programs. Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia distribute funds according to this pattern. SREB states should use funds earmarked for dropout prevention to develop a knowledge base of effective practices for improving the achievement of at-risk students in the middle and high school grades.

Are States Missing an Opportunity with the Job Training Partnership Act?

States have a responsibility to apprise schools of the availability of JTPA funds and how to direct funds toward dropout prevention. Officials in the State Department of Education in one SREB state report that at least $13 million in JTPA funds could be legitimately used for dropout prevention during the regular academic year under Title II-A. At least $16.5 million could be used for summer youth programs under Title II-B. These summer programs must include an employment training component and a focus on developing basic skills. Some local educators in various SREB states take advantage of these funds to design programs that include interventions encouraging potential dropouts to change direction and stay in school. It is not known to what extent local districts are using these funds to support dropout prevention efforts.

Another sizable source of funding for dropout prevention is found in the array of state and federal programs that states administer for at-risk populations, including potential dropouts. The largest source of federal allocations is for economically disadvantaged youth under the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). For example, Jacksonville, Florida, has used Job Training Partnership funds to serve over 1,000 students each summer since 1987. The program involves at-risk students in a combined work and summer school program to improve basic competencies in math, science, and English for those students. An external evaluation of the program comparing participants with a group of non-participating youth revealed increased academic achievement and school completion rates and lower juvenile arrest rates for the program participants.

Other special non-governmental funding sources include grants from private foundations for school, district, or local government projects and programs, and grants from local businesses and industries which are often administered jointly with local school districts. Schools and districts can obtain support for different elements of a comprehensive dropout prevention plan through such public and private sector funds. SREB states should use these other sources of discretionary funding for efforts as part of a unified and comprehensive state program.

State dropout prevention initiatives should not be limited to isolated, special projects. Strategies should be initiated to get local school districts to use available resources in a planned approach to adopt proven practices for serving at-risk students. Schools and school systems have typically addressed the dropout problem in a highly fragmented manner, adding and soon dropping some special new service as project funds become available and then expire. The objective is to encourage schools to make substantial changes in their curriculum, instructional approaches,

Federal Programs Serving Potential Dropout Population

The following programs provide states with funding that could be used to support programs and services for potential dropouts who qualify accordingly:

Head Start
Follow Through*
Chapter I Compensatory Education, Basic Grant
Chapter I Neglected and Delinquent Children Set-Aside
Chapter I Handicapped Children Set-Aside
Chapter I Migrants Set-Aside
Drug Free Schools
National Diffusion Network
Substance Abuse Prevention Program
Education Partnership Program
AIDS Education Program
Stuart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Program
Educationally Handicapped, Basic Grant
Educationally Handicapped, Early Childhood Set-Aside
Bilingual Education
Emergency Immigrant and Refugee Education
Vocational Education, Basic Grant (Youth and Adults)
Vocational Education, Consumer and Homemaking Set-Aside (Youth and Adults)
Vocational Education, Community-Based Organizations Set-Aside (Youth and Adults)
Job Training Partnership Act Title II-A (Training for Youth and Adults)
Job Training Partnership Act Title II-B (Summer Program)
Community Service Block Grants (All Uses)

*Follow Through grants are made to sponsoring agencies, such as universities, and may or may not be used by these agencies in their home states.

school climate, and organization to serve at-risk students more effectively.

Some states are beginning to take steps to encourage local systems to adopt proven practices by linking state funding to successful practices. For example, a plan to be implemented in Texas requires that if a local district does not reduce the dropout rate to five percent by the year 1992, that district must target 33 percent of its funds for compensatory education on appropriate dropout prevention programs. Maryland will not fund a school through Maryland Tomorrow—which contains its dropout initiative—unless it has a plan and program for implementation in accordance with the state's design.

10 *SREB recommends that states promote a vision of how middle and secondary schools must change if more students are to complete high school.*

While initiatives in pre-school and early childhood education will assist in producing long-term improvement in keeping students in school, states must accompany such efforts with interventions directed specifically at students in the middle and high schools today. SREB encourages states to establish a vision of how middle and secondary schools must change if they are to have larger numbers of at-risk students completing high school. This vision must address poor school climate and mediocre instructional practices that affect not only at-risk students, but the large numbers of students who are not pursuing a college preparatory program of study.

Practices among the most successful sites in the SREB-Vocational Education Consortium and in SREB's current dropout prevention project confirm the successful practices of the accelerated and effective schools models, described in the literature (Levin, 1986; Levin, 1987; Levin, 1990; Kretovics et al., 1991; Peterson, 1989; Wiggins, 1991; Weiss, 1988; Rich et al., 1979; Weber, 1991). SREB has found that the following nine strategies used at the middle school and high school levels have successfully helped schools cut their dropout rates.

- Identify potential dropouts early in their middle and high school careers and select those who will receive targeted assistance. An early, periodic, and reliable identification process is essential for targeting special assistance to potential dropouts.
- Establish higher expectations in basic competencies for all students, including potential dropouts. Many teachers and counselors will have to change conventional low expectations concerning what at-risk students should study and how well they can learn.
- Enroll targeted potential dropouts in a combined college preparatory and occupational program, rather than allow them to be shuffled onto the general track leading nowhere. Teachers and counselors must work on an individual basis with all students to help them plan a program of study that will provide them access to college preparatory level mathematics, science, language arts, and occupational studies leading to employment and to further education.
- Use applied instructional strategies to teach basic competencies so that as students see that the content is meaningful and related to real life, they will become engaged in learning.
- Enhance and expand targeted students' personal views of their career and education potential and opportunities by giving them access to materials and persons—employers, workers, and persons involved in further education—that will help them build a dream for the future, with the program of study as the bridge to that future.
- Use an interdisciplinary team of vocational, academic, and support personnel to plan and monitor curriculum and provide extra instructional support, when needed, to targeted students over a period of several years. Faculty collegiality is essential for building a bond based on a common interest in making the

school day more meaningful for at-risk students

- Implement, as needed, a program of personal attention and extra instructional support to accelerate, rather than remediate, targeted students. This should include extended day and extended school year efforts and mandatory summer school programs for students who fail.
- Involve parents in activities to help keep their children in school and to accelerate their academic progress.
- Involve business and community leaders in efforts to keep targeted students in school and to advance their basic competencies by: helping the community see that the dropout problem is much more than a school problem; developing a mentoring program; encouraging business to curtail the hiring of dropouts; developing employment practices that encourage students to strive for the high school diploma; and encouraging employees with children in school to become involved in their children's future.

The success of these strategies, however, depends upon strong administrative support at the school and district levels, appropriate staff development with follow-up activities, and, from the entire school staff, the expression of care and concern for all students, not just those who are college-bound. SREB states need to communicate to system and school leaders the strategies that successful schools are using to hold more potential dropouts in school. States should use national and state evaluation information as a base for refining valid dropout prevention practices. The state role is to help local educators successfully implement proven practices.

11 *SREB recommends that states require all school systems to develop dropout prevention plans at the school level for those clusters of middle and secondary schools with a dropout rate greater than the state's dropout goal for the year 2000. Plans should be approved by the State Department of Education.*

Currently, only Florida, Texas, and West Virginia require all school systems to develop dropout prevention plans and report on annual progress. Only Florida requires that local systems submit dropout prevention plans for state approval. The extent to which local systems in the region have developed dropout prevention plans is very uneven.

- North Carolina requires school systems having dropout rates above the state average to submit plans.
- South Carolina will require formal plans of all districts by 1994.
- All school systems in Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia have developed some sort of informal action plan.
- Informal action plans have been developed by 50 percent of the school systems in Mississippi; 25 percent in Georgia and in South Carolina; 20 percent in Louisiana.

The remaining SREB states do not collect this information. Moreover, no state is currently keeping score on the adequacy of these plans, the extent to which they are carried out, and the results being achieved. At least, local systems should be required to describe procedures that will be used for identifying potential dropouts in middle and secondary schools, to identify interventions for keeping potential dropouts in school while advancing their academic achievement, and to designate procedures for tracking and reporting annually what is happening to identified students. States should require special action plans at the school level for all clusters of middle and secondary schools with a dropout rate greater than the rate suggested in the state's dropout goal for the year 2000.

By requiring and assisting local school systems to develop and implement dropout prevention plans, the state demonstrates its commitment to the goal of reducing its dropout rate and increas-

ing its graduation rate. While all SREB states have such goals, few states have developed comprehensive policies and strategies for encouraging local systems to formulate and implement plans to achieve substantial reductions in dropout rates.

12 *SREB recommends that states provide local systems with technical assistance for reducing dropout rates.*

The degree of leadership assumed by the state in working to reduce the dropout rate may be determined by the extent of state involvement in funding research projects and providing a broad range of technical assistance that includes the following: publishing and circulating to all school systems a dropout prevention planning guide; publishing and distributing descriptions of successful dropout prevention strategies; conducting state and regional workshops and conferences on dropout prevention; and furnishing on-site technical assistance to all school systems.

Publishing Information on Dropout Prevention. Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, and West Virginia publish and distribute guides for local school districts to use when planning dropout prevention activities.

Most state guides describe the characteristics of dropouts. Some guides also describe interventions to target those characteristics. Guides in Alabama and West Virginia have tables with data on dropouts by gender, race, attendance patterns, when they dropped out, grade level, achievement scores, grade average, number of grades repeated, out-of-school work patterns, and socioeconomic status.

Guides in Florida, North Carolina, and South Carolina—where comprehensive and structured state dropout prevention plans have been or are being developed—describe the required components and procedures of a dropout reduction plan. The Kentucky publication contains guidelines for the schools in submitting proposals for state dropout prevention funds. Some guides also outline what parents and businesses can do to promote school completion and to prevent students from dropping out. The Georgia guide contains perhaps the most comprehensive information on dropout prevention. It reviews the literature on dropouts and describes successful programs, listing their contact person, target group, programming strategies, and evaluation methods. SREB recommends a resource guide on dropout prevention that provides at least the following:

- instructions for developing and implementing a local plan;
- descriptions of successful programs;
- practices that appear to work in reducing the dropout rates; and
- procedures for identifying potential dropouts and providing them with special assistance.

State and Regional Workshops and Conferences. Eight states (Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia) held statewide and/or regional conferences on dropout prevention for local school leaders during the 1989-90 school year. Conferences occur periodically in six of these states (Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia).

State-sponsored conferences and workshops effectively sustain attention on reaching the regional and state dropout prevention goal. These conferences enable the state to recognize school leaders who have been most effective in their dropout prevention efforts, giving them a forum for sharing with others. They also provide state coordinators with the opportunity to up-date schools on statewide programs, practices, and policies. SREB recommends that all states conduct conferences and workshops aimed at raising the level of local effort in closing the gap between the current dropout rate and the goal for the year 2000.

On-site Technical Assistance. Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia report that they provide technical assistance, beyond distributing printed materials, to local school districts.

In Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia the assistance comes chiefly in the form of workshops or in-service programs at the local level. North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Tennessee provide assistance to any system upon request. In Virginia, a representative from the State Department of Education makes an annual visit to each school district receiving a state dropout grant to assist the site in its efforts and to monitor the grant.

Dropout prevention research centers at the University of Miami in Florida and Clemson University in South Carolina offer information and work with local systems. In addition to assisting South Carolina's schools, the service area of Clemson University's National Dropout Prevention Center extends throughout the entire nation. SREB states need to identify a cadre of professionals from the State Department of Education, higher education institutions, and local school systems who can provide technical assistance to local school systems and schools needing special help.

13 *SREB recommends that states focus on developing leadership at the school level to direct dropout prevention efforts.*

A key role of state leaders is to develop school level "hands-on know-how" for addressing the dropout problem. Each SREB state's Department of Education should create a network of contiguous middle and secondary schools pursuing a common goal of dropout prevention. This network could extend throughout the region. Each of these 'lighthouse schools" should have a team of teachers and administrators spearheading the school's dropout prevention efforts. The state should help school site teams define their dropout problems and develop a plan for solving them. At appropriate intervals, the state should convene these school teams to share what they are learning. An essential role of the state is to develop the capacity of school-based educators to define and address the problem and expand the number of "lighthouse schools" that are effectively reducing school dropout rates.

State leadership is needed to change the mindset of local school teams. Presently, the prevailing attitude is that "We cannot reduce the dropout rate at our school because the students are poor; they speak another language at home; there are too many project kids." State leaders must convince local school leaders that, although these factors exist, they must be surmounted. Reducing the state dropout rate will occur only when every school in the state is committed to a program of dropout prevention. Dropout reduction is largely a matter of capacity and will of local leadership.

14 *SREB recommends that states establish on-site review teams who can evaluate progress and provide technical assistance to those schools in trouble.*

SREB states need to conduct extensive on-site visits to school districts and schools with chronic dropout problems and to provide school leaders with a comprehensive set of recommendations for specific actions. At present, no SREB state does this.

Each state should create interagency review teams to conduct on-site evaluations of schools

and communities failing to make progress in reducing their dropout rate. A team would spend several days at a site to gather and compile information regarding the school's problems. The team should present its findings and recommendations to school faculty, the school board, parents, and business and community leaders. One or more members of the team would work with the school and community over several months to translate recommendations into practice.

The state's on-site review process should be sufficiently developed so that any school system could request a state on-site review team to conduct a study of those contiguous clusters of middle and secondary schools within its system having the most severe dropout problems. The SREB-State Vocational Education Consortium has already developed a dropout prevention model that states could replicate.

15 *SREB recommends that states require all youth to be enrolled in an "approved educational program" until age 18 or until they receive a diploma, whichever comes first.*

As a region, we can no longer be satisfied with educating only about 70 percent of our youth through high school. Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Virginia already require school attendance until the age of 18 (Table 7). Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas require attendance until the age of 17. Six SREB states (Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, and West Virginia) still require school attendance only until age 16.

States should provide youth who are not successful in the traditional educational setting with alternative choices for completing high school. These alternatives should show a clear relationship between education and employment and should be aimed at advancing students' academic and technical competencies. State and local dollars should follow them to their alternative setting. The intent is not only to make a commitment to educate all youth until age 18, but to diversify the setting and the approach employed.

Alternative choices should provide a nontraditional approach for youth to meet high school graduation requirements and meet the standards for achievement in communication, mathematics, and science that are essential for continued learning on the job or in a secondary educational setting.

Approved alternative education should give preferential consideration to:

- Year-round access to basic and academic education and services, such as employment and career counseling and job placement, that accommodate students' special needs without jeopardizing academic progress;
- Alternative instructional techniques that address alternate learning styles, including hands-on and computer-based experience;

Table 7
STATE LAWS TO PROMOTE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

States	Compulsory School Attendance Age	Driver's License Linkage
Alabama	16	no
Arkansas	18	yes
Florida	17	yes
Georgia	16	no
Kentucky	16	yes
Louisiana	17	yes
Maryland	16	no
Mississippi	17	no*
North Carolina	16	no
Oklahoma	18	no
South Carolina	17	no
Tennessee	17	yes
Texas	17	yes
Virginia	18	yes
West Virginia	16	yes

SOURCE: State Departments of Education, SREB March 1990 Survey

*Legislation has been enacted, but not implemented

- Mentors to provide positive role models, encouragement, and the extra help needed to succeed;
- Liaisons with employers and a full range of community health and social service agencies;
- Supportive, family-like environment;
- Assessment to assure that students have acquired the academic foundation necessary for further learning; and
- A built-in process of frequent evaluations of alternative programs to prevent "approved educational alternatives" from eroding into a means for warehousing "undesirable" youth.

Several excellent models of alternative "state approved" educational programs exist throughout the region and nation.

Adult high schools, such as the open campus high school in Gwinnett County, Georgia, and the Cohen Adult Learning Center in Nashville, Tennessee, that offer flexible scheduling allowing students to attend any classes they need between 4 p.m. and 10 p.m.

Cities in schools, such as the one in Charlotte, North Carolina, that promote and facilitate the coordinated delivery of existing health, educational, and social support services at the educational site for the benefit of at-risk youth and their families.

Secondary academies at area vocational schools encompassing the "school within a school" concept, exemplified by the Peninsula Academies/Partnership Academies in Stanford, California. Such programs combine strategies of smaller class size with applied instructional techniques in academic and technical areas developed through business and school partnerships.

Alternative secondary schools on college campuses, such as Middle College at LaGuardia Community College in New York, where potential dropouts who do not fit in well in the conventional school setting can receive the necessary counseling and special help in the courses they need to complete high school. These students attend school in a setting where they feel important and can see the direct connection between the high school diploma and further learning, either at work or in an institution.

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16 *SREB recommends that states establish a system of incentives and sanctions that encourage students to attend school and encourage unity of purpose among school faculty to successfully return at-risk students to the mainstream of education.*

SREB believes that, through incentives, the state can symbolize to the public and to students the importance of remaining in school until completion. Examples of such incentives include linking driver's licenses to school attendance. Seven states have enacted legislation that ties the privilege of holding a driver's license with staying in school. The purpose is to discourage students from excessive absenteeism and from leaving school prematurely. Six states—Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Tennessee, and West Virginia—have provisions for suspension of driver's licenses on the grounds of unexcused absenteeism (Table 7). Students in these states may have their driver's licenses reinstated by complying with the attendance policy or with other specific requirements. Texas and Virginia have taken a milder approach in linking the issuance of a license with school attendance.

While these actions are usually carried out without additional funds, some states are looking closely at ways to avoid some of the problems experienced by states that adopted these measures early. Problems include a sudden influx of dropouts to schools that are not prepared to help those students address their difficulties. Florida requires that the school district provide counseling to all students before suspension of the license.

In Kentucky, licenses can be suspended only in those districts that operate state-approved alternative education programs designed to meet the educational needs of students who are not successful in the regular school setting. Kentucky also requires that applicants for the driver's license show that they are enrolled in school and have not been found "academically deficient."

Statutes in Louisiana and Tennessee were modeled after West Virginia's measure, but have added provisions whereby students can appeal the denial or cancellation of a license by filing an application for a hearing before the public safety department (Gaines, 1990). Such incentives to encourage students to remain in high school are most useful when they are coupled with strategies aimed at identifying and effectively engaging potential dropouts in the educational process.

State and local educational leaders should join with community and business leaders to develop incentives that reward at-risk students for staying and succeeding in school. States could develop standards of achievement in communications, mathematics, and science for at-risk students. Students meeting these standards would have the foundation for continued learning in either a work or education setting.

Employers in the state or local area should pledge to employ these students in jobs with potential for advancement, and scholarships should be made available to support these students in formal education beyond high school. At-risk students need to learn that hard work will pay dividends. Many of these students need a goal that can motivate them. Eligible students would be identified in the middle grades as students most likely not to complete high school.

Such a program offers several advantages. First, it reconnects school to a goal. Second, it obligates the school and community to provide extra help and encouragement to obtain the goal. Third, it focuses positive personal attention on that group of students most ignored by the community and some schools.

A dropout prevention advisory committee, composed of political and educational leaders active in dropout reduction, attending an SREB meeting, recently recommended the establishment of "bonus grants" for schools that have, over a three-year period, significantly raised both the academic achievement and the school retention rate of at-risk students.

The school's principal and faculty would decide how the funds would be used to further their dropout prevention efforts. A high school principal from Kentucky said, "Bonus grants help build a team mentality, and it is not just one or two teachers who will reduce the dropout problem. It is everybody buying into a set of strategies for improving school outcomes for at-risk students." SREB recommends that states develop ways to encourage a united school faculty effort to work toward successfully educating at-risk students.

Holding schools accountable for carrying out dropout prevention practices is another way to focus attention on the importance of reducing the dropout rate. SREB believes that states will need to develop ways of placing sanctions on districts and schools which are unsuccessful, over a period of time, in reducing high dropout rates, in improving attendance rates of at-risk students, and in improving academic achievement as measured by grades and national standardized tests.

In North Carolina, dropout plans for local systems are subject to the state's accountability measure and performance standards in the accreditation process. Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia are in the process of developing sanctions to encourage local systems to adopt proven dropout prevention strategies. In Florida, districts that have not included a teen pregnancy program in their dropout prevention plans are ineligible for the extra state funds allocated to all schools for each potential dropout.

Four SREB states—Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia—have developed some type of sanctions for school districts that are unresponsive to the state's dropout initiative. Current sanction policies focus on holding districts accountable only for having dropout prevention plans. No SREB state has yet issued sanctions against a school or district for failing to reduce an excessive dropout rate.

CONCLUSION

The comprehensiveness of state plans and strategies for reducing the dropout rate will have an impact on how long it takes to reduce a state's dropout rate. SREB states vary greatly in: the organizations addressing dropout prevention; the leadership being provided to the effort; and the state strategies for sustaining a long-term focus on dropout prevention. The more active a state is in these three areas, the more local school systems will be encouraged to address the problem.

To reduce the dropout rate, states must have an information system that will determine the various factors causing students to drop out and secure essential information about the characteristics of those dropouts. With this comprehensive information, strategies to treat the causes can be planned more effectively. The education specialists who are responsible for dropout prevention in SREB states confirm that progress in developing effective statewide management information systems for dropout prevention is very uneven in the region.

It is not enough for states just to collect information about dropouts—the information must be used to focus and sustain public attention on the dropout problem. One state educational specialist responsible for dropout prevention has said it best: "If states want action at the building level to improve dropout prevention, then states must publish annually, by system and by school, information on attendance, chronic absenteeism, and the number of dropouts." To keep score and to report useful information on dropout prevention, states must have the capacity to track the progress of at-risk students in grades K through 12 and beyond.

To effectively orchestrate state personnel and financial resources toward a dropout prevention goal, states must establish an office or commission for dropout prevention with the authority and visibility equal to the goal. SREB's survey of states reveals that most have not created an organizational structure necessary for unifying public and private resources toward a common dropout prevention goal.

Keeping the score and reporting the results of dropout prevention is essential, but without a comprehensive plan aimed at closing the gap between the current dropout rate and the state goal, little will change. The personal and environmental forces causing students to drop out are ingrained in the social and cultural fabric of the home, school, and community. To make significant progress, an organized and purposeful set of counterforces must be mounted and sustained on a long-term basis.

An adequate plan for dropout reduction would engage local educational and community leaders in defining and addressing the problem. The aim of the plan would be to:

- establish among educational leaders that the current dropout rate is no longer acceptable;
- build a knowledge base of proven practices for dropout prevention;
- provide technical assistance on a continuing basis to local school districts adopting dropout prevention practices; and
- advance the know-how for system and school-level leaders to address the dropout problem effectively and successfully.

The good news is that all SREB states have a goal to reduce significantly the dropout rate, and there is growing public concern that actions must be taken to address the problem. The bad news is that most states have mounted strategies that are woefully inadequate for achieving their established goals.

Reaching the dropout reduction goal will require state leadership initiatives that engage local leaders—in education, the community, and business—to higher levels of motivation, performance, and moral responsibility for successfully holding more students in school through graduation. Until that occurs, significantly reducing dropout rates is likely to remain a dream characterized by hit and miss operations. SREB states must act decisively and quickly to assure that all of their citizens are educated to meet the sophisticated, technological society we can expect in the 21st century.

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