

ED386515 1995-08-00 School Dropouts: New Information about an Old Problem. ERIC/CUE Digest, Number 109.

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In the last few decades, both the personal and social cost of dropping out of school have increased. Concurrently, significant education resources have been applied to student retention efforts. The primary source of information about dropouts is the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education, which collects statistics and conducts longitudinal studies. To present a picture of the current dropout situation, researchers at the Policy Information Center of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) have analyzed NCES information, data from state, city, and other sources, and results of surveys of recent high school students. The ETS report, *Dreams Deferred: High School Dropouts in the United States*, with a special focus on urban youth, is summarized in this digest.

THE DROPOUT POPULATION

THE DROPOUT RATE OVERALL. Calculating an accurate dropout rate is nearly impossible, since some students return to school, and schools differ in their definitions and counting methods. Nevertheless, the dropout rate appears to be declining, although about 381,000 students left school without graduating in 1993. Nearly two-thirds of the dropouts leave before the tenth grade, 20 percent drop out by the eighth grade, and 3 percent do not even complete the fourth grade.

ETHNIC DIFFERENCES. Hispanic students are slightly more likely to drop out than African Americans; Asian American and white students are less likely than both those groups. Nearly 40 percent of Hispanic students who drop out do so before the eighth grade.

THE URBAN RATE. The dropout rate in large urban districts remains high, although it has decreased slightly in the last few years. In some districts it is double the national average, and in 1992-93 one out of four districts had a four-year dropout rate greater than 35 percent. Also, as opposed to the national trend, the rate for African American and Hispanic students is increasing in some urban areas.

HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY CANDIDATES. Each year, however, nearly half a million people get a high school equivalency General Educational Development (GED) certificate. In 1993 the 450,000 people who passed the GED tests accounted for one-seventh of the population receiving a diploma. The average age of GED candidates was 26 in that year, and more than 60 percent of them planned to continue their schooling after receiving a certificate.

INCOME AND EARNINGS POTENTIAL

In 1992 dropouts earned slightly under \$13,000 on average, about one-third less than high school graduates.

With respect to lifetime wages, the gap between dropouts and more educated adults is widening steadily as opportunities expand for higher skilled workers and disappear for the less skilled. For example, it is estimated that, overall, the 1993 dropout pool will earn \$212,000 less than high school graduates, and \$812,000 less than college graduates. Further, in the last 20 years, the earnings level for dropouts doubled while it nearly tripled for college graduates, a trend that is likely to intensify in the future.

Dropouts comprise nearly half of the heads of households on welfare, and a similar percentage of the prison population.

CHARACTERISTICS

Using data from surveys covering four years in the lives of students who began high school in 1988 (the National Educational Longitudinal Study, NELS:88, Second Follow-Up), ETS identified characteristics common to many dropouts based on the youth's responses:

MARITAL STATUS AND PARENTHOOD. In 1992, about one-fifth of the dropouts (approximate age 18) were married, living as married, or divorced, with females more likely than males to be married. Nearly 40 percent had a child or were expecting one. Nearly one-third of the females who dropped out cited pregnancy as the reason. Interestingly, some youth said they dropped out because they wanted to have a family: 12 percent of the females and six percent of the males.

SCHOOL AND HOME STABILITY. More than half the dropouts moved during the four-year study period, compared with 15 percent of the graduates. Nearly a quarter of the dropouts changed schools two or more times. Twice as many dropouts as graduates ran away from home: twelve and six percent.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES. A large majority of dropouts were enrolled in a general high school program, with very few in a college preparatory program.

*Almost one-fifth were held back a grade, and almost half failed a course. They were also more likely than the persisters to have been enrolled in special education or alternative programs. Dropouts reported the following information about personal behavior during their last two years in school:

* Almost one-half missed at least 10 days of school.



* One-third cut class at least 10 times.



* One-quarter were late at least 10 times.



* One-third were put on in-school suspension, suspended, or put on probation.



* Six percent were transferred to another school for disciplinary reasons.



* Eleven percent were arrested.



* Eight percent spent time in a juvenile home or shelter.

ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS. Dropouts tended to believe that they don't have control over their lives, that chance and luck are important, and that something always seemed to stop them from getting ahead. Conversely, graduates felt that they had a great deal of control over their lives, a belief known to promote educational achievement.

Dropouts did not differ significantly from graduates in their sense of self-concept, with both expressing some negative personal feelings. Nearly one-half felt "useless at times," one-third thought they were "no good at all," and nearly one-quarter "didn't have much to be proud of."

Despite leaving school, 85 percent of the dropouts planned to attain at least a high school education. About one-fifth expected to attend a career education school; a third expected to attend college, with 11 percent looking forward to getting a degree; and five percent expected to get a master's degree.

REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT

As reported, usually a variety of school problems and personal factors combined to cause a student to drop out. Dropouts cited the following reasons most frequently:



SCHOOL FACTORS* Didn't like school in general or a particular transfer school.

* Was failing, getting poor grades, or couldn't keep up with school work. (Only 18 percent reported having passed their last year of school.)

* Didn't get along with teachers and/or students.

* Had disciplinary problems, was suspended, or expelled.

* Didn't fit in.

* Didn't feel safe.



PERSONAL FACTORS* Got a job, had a family to support, or had trouble managing both school and work.

* Got married, got pregnant (one-third were pregnant when they left), became a parent, wanted to have a family, or had a family to take care of.

* Had friends who dropped out.

* Wanted to travel.

* Had a drug or alcohol problem.



INTERVENTIONS



SCHOOLSThe most frequent intervention by school personnel was trying to talk a student into staying, but even this effort was cited by only 39 percent of dropouts surveyed. However, since the dropouts' responses about interventions were based on a question about what happened "the last time" they stopped attending school, they may not have thought they should include earlier interventions. Further, the youth may not

have even realized that some long-term interventions, such as remedial education, were actually dropout prevention measures. Among the concrete offers made to potential dropouts were these:

- * Help with making up missed work, tutoring, and/or placement in a special program.
- * Transfer to another school.
- * Help with personal problems.
- * Calls or visits home.

Some schools indicated that they would permit a student to return if he or she got good grades, followed rules, or promised better attendance. Conversely, 17 percent of the potential dropouts reported being told that they couldn't come back to school, and 16 percent were expelled or suspended.



FAMILIES Dropouts reported that parents and guardians were more opposed to their decision than were school personnel, with three-quarters indicating that their families had tried to talk them out of leaving school. However, a majority were also told that the decision was theirs. Among the offers made by families to encourage persistence were these:

- * Help with personal problems.
- * Counseling.
- * Help with making up school work.
- * Arranging for tutoring, a school transfer, and/or placement in a special program.

About 20 percent of parents and guardians, particularly those with sons at risk of dropping out, also contacted principals, teachers, and counselors. The youth reported that an equal percentage of caregivers said that it was all right to leave, while 12 percent punished the dropout.

CONCLUSION

Despite leaving school, most dropouts recognized that they needed further education and expected to acquire it. Indeed, eight percent of the youth surveyed already had

obtained a GED certificate. Further, the career aspirations of many dropouts were high, although they were currently holding low-skill, low-paying, and possibly dead-end jobs. Such optimism suggests that they did not believe they were sacrificing their futures by dropping out.

Since completing a high school education without interruption is the best foundation for realizing the dreams of youth, it is crucial that both educators and families find ways to make it possible for all students the pregnant and parenting, the ones who need to hold jobs, the failing, and even the most problematic student to stay in school.

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