

# Helping Students Finish School

**Why Students Drop Out and  
How to Help Them Graduate**



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State Superintendent of  
Public Instruction

**December 2003**  
**Updated May 2006**

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## **Why Students Drop Out and How to Help Them Graduate**

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### **Abbreviations**

AYP	adequate yearly progress
ELL	English language learners
GED	General Educational Development credential
IEP	individualized education program
LEP	limited English proficiency
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NCLB	No Child Left Behind Act of 2001
OSPI	Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The federal requirements of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) have placed a new focus on increasing graduation rates and reducing dropout rates. While the dropout problem has generated research and new programs over the last 30 years, the dropout rate has remained relatively unchanged. Students drop out of school for many reasons, and the characteristics of dropouts are often the same as students who do not drop out.

This document examines the multi-faceted issues related to dropping out and suggests actions to improve schools and help students complete their education. Specifically, it summarizes the research and professional literature in order to answer the following questions:

- Who is a dropout?
- How many students drop out of school in the U.S. and in Washington State?
- Who drops out of schools and why?
- What can be done to reduce the number of dropouts?

This document is organized into seven chapters. The Introduction discusses how dropout rates are defined and the consequences of dropping out of school early. The second chapter examines the dropout rates in the U.S. and Washington State. Chapters 3 and 4 look at student, family, community, and education-related factors that contribute to the dropout problem. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss a variety of ways to keep students in school as well as dropout recovery programs. The concluding chapter examines the implications for school and district policies and procedures and for school reform in general. The bibliography and two appendixes provide additional information.

### **WHO IS A DROPOUT?**

No universally accepted definition of dropout exists. Dropouts are typically defined as students who leave school (not including transfers) before they graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Some students leave school before entering ninth grade, but most drop out during their high school years. The new NCLB definition of a graduate considers those who receive a General Education Development (GED) certificate or finish their secondary education with an individualized education program (IEP) diploma as dropouts. Under the federal definition, if a student moves out of the district and no transcript is requested, the student has an “unknown” status and is considered a dropout. Some mistakenly consider students who do not graduate on time (within the traditional four-year period) as dropouts, even though they may still be in school beyond the typical graduation period.

The dropout rate can be calculated in several ways, including how many leave in one year (an “annual” dropout rate) and how many drop out from the beginning of Grade 9

through the end of Grade 12 (a “cohort” dropout rate).<sup>1</sup> As a result, dropout rates vary considerably, depending on the method used, which can cause confusion. In addition, difficulties in record keeping and reporting dropouts have led to questions about the accuracy of these rates. Some researchers calculate a school’s “holding power” or “promoting power” rather than a dropout rate as a more accurate measure of a school’s effectiveness.

Historically, leaving school at some point before high school graduation was the norm. In the 1940s less than half of individuals age 25–29 completed high school. Thus, dropping out was not considered a problem. As high school completion became commonplace, graduation became an expectation for the majority of the nation’s youth. Although the use of the term dropout first surfaced in the early 1900s, it did not come into popular use until much later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1960s dropouts were frequently described in pejorative terms, i.e., as “deviants” in the context of juvenile delinquency and other adolescent issues.

Over the past forty years, national interest and concern about students who drop out of school have increased, especially when highly-publicized studies rekindle national interest in the issue. Many researchers began investigating the dropout problem in the 1960s and 1970s, examining the characteristics of the individuals who left school early and the conditions that might predict their dropping out. The Nation at Risk report in 1983 and several subsequent studies describing the state of education in the country again heightened attention to dropouts. In the 1990s the National Goals 2000 initiative established a goal of a 90% graduation rate. The federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation, signed into law in January 2002, has renewed discussions about students who drop out.

The costs and consequences of dropping out have become increasingly serious for individuals and for society. Students who drop out are more likely to be unemployed and to earn less over their working life. Trends toward a higher skilled labor force will make it even harder for dropouts economically. Although many dropouts pursue a GED certification, it does not adequately prepare young people for attaining well-paying employment or for accessing higher education. Dropouts tend to experience higher levels of early pregnancy and substance abuse, and they tend to require more social services of various types. Young people who are imprisoned or sentenced to adult prisons are likely to be school dropouts.

### **HOW MANY STUDENTS DROP OUT IN THE U.S. AND WASHINGTON STATE?**

The national dropout rate varies from 4–30 percent depending upon the method and definition used. The lower figure applies to the annual rate (the percentage of students who dropped out in a single year), while the upper figure is a cohort rate. The percentage of youth that leave school before graduation has decreased continually from 1972 to 1987, although the rate has remained quite stable since 1987.

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<sup>1</sup> The three most common methods used are *event*, *cohort*, and *status*. These are explained in Chapter 1.



In Washington, several studies have estimated the graduation rate using different methods. In August 2002 the Manhattan Institute estimated the on-time graduation rate as 67 percent. A study for the Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission released about the same time estimated the on-time graduation rate for the Class of 2001 as 70 percent using a different method, but the study did not estimate a dropout rate. The state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) reported that 70 percent of the students in the Class of 2004 graduated “on-time.” This figure excluded students who earned a GED certificate.

OSPI’s report noted that nearly 6 percent of all students in Grades 9–12 dropped out during the 2003–2004 school year. The dropout rate was lowest in Grade 9. Asian and white students had the lowest dropout rate while the rates for American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students were much higher. Males dropped out at a higher rate than females. Almost half of the students who dropped out had an unknown location, so it is difficult to get a complete picture of why students leave school. (Many of them may have enrolled elsewhere and would be considered transfers if the receiving school requested the students’ school records.)

### **WHO DROPS OUT AND WHY?**

Keeping students in school is generally seen as a public good. However, some educators may feel relief when disruptive, unmotivated, or struggling students leave school, which results in smaller and easier to manage classes. Students may feel that dropping out is an escape from a hostile, uncaring, or boring school. Leaving school may give them a sense of control in their lives.

Researchers have attempted to identify who drops out of school in order to increase our understanding of the issue and help educators and policymakers develop programs, policies, and interventions that will reduce the numbers of dropouts. Students dropout for a variety of reasons. These include student, family, community, and education-related factors. Research has not determined causal relationships among these factors. Although discussed separately, these factors are closely related and interact with one another.

#### **Student, Family, and Community Factors**

Educators have limited impact on a number of factors that can influence students to drop out. Some research has focused on the students themselves, or their family circumstances, as the root of the problem. These studies have identified dropouts as those who are likely to be students

- from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- of color, particularly Hispanic, Native American and African American
- who move or change schools frequently
- with poor academic achievement
- with poor school attendance
- who have repeated one or more grades
- who speak a primary language other than English

- who attend school in large cities
- who have friends or family members that dropped out
- who have an illness or disability
- who become pregnant
- who have low self-esteem or self-efficacy.

The type of family mobility, support, and expectations can also have an influence on the likelihood of a student dropping out. Economic and sociocultural factors can also contribute to the dropout rate. These factors include the influence of gang and drug cultures, the feeling of independence generated by having a job, and the lack of community resources to support at-risk students.

### Education-Related Factors

Educational institutions themselves contribute significantly to the dropout problem. Discipline and grading policies, school organization and size, program assignments, course content, the type of instruction, school climate, and adult-student relationships can all influence students to drop out. “Lack of engagement” and “membership in school” are terms that capture some of the factors. The National Dropout Prevention Center lists school-related factors as

- “Conflict between home and school culture
- Ineffective discipline system
- Lack of adequate counseling
- Negative school climate
- Lack of relevant curriculum
- Passive instructional strategies
- Inappropriate use of technology
- Disregard of student learning styles
- Retentions/suspensions
- Low expectations
- Lack of language instruction.”

Educators should not try to predict who will drop out based on risk factors because many who drop out do not fit the profile and many who fit the profile finish school on time. According to one study, the majority of dropouts have not become so disengaged from school by the tenth grade that their withdrawal is inevitable. The research suggests that solving the dropout problem requires changing the educational system to serve students better, not just trying to “fix” at-risk students.

### **WHAT CAN BE DONE TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF DROPOUTS?**

Dropout prevention and recovery programs have been implemented with varying degrees of success. The strategies for dropout prevention and recovery are organized into two categories: comprehensive school improvement and targeted programs for the prevention and recovery of dropouts.

### Comprehensive School Improvement

To reduce the number of dropouts and increase graduation rates, schools need to make systemic changes. Restructuring and comprehensive school improvement are terms often used to denote the extent of change needed to create schools that are responsive to all students, including those at risk of dropping out. School improvement is a strategic process for reforming schools and increasing student learning. The *Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools* capture elements for this level of organizational change. The strategies identified in the report *Addressing the Achievement Gap: A Challenge for Washington Educators* also apply to reducing the dropout rate.

Increasing students' sense of belonging and engagement can help them stay in school. Making schools more personal by establishing smaller and more supportive learning environments, including more meaningful student-teacher connections, will help create strong, supportive communities of learning for students and educators. Using meaningful curriculum and effective instruction will help engage students in the learning process and reduce the boredom that can lead to dropping out. *The High Schools We Need: Improving an American Institution*, a 2006 report, provides a more extensive discussion of structural and instructional strategies to increase student sense of belonging and engagement.

### Prevention and Recovery Programs

Programs that focus on dropout prevention and recovery encompass a range of interventions. These include early intervention activities, in-school supplemental and out-of-school enhancement programs, alternative programs and schools, and recovery through continuation schools or programs. This document provides descriptions and examples of such programs. Although case studies and anecdotal evidence point to the success of many of these programs, little research has been conducted to determine what programs work best and for what students. Research reports, case studies, and anecdotal records suggest useful strategies for schools and districts to use to help the potential dropout. The report *Promising Programs and Practices for Preventing Dropouts* is a research synthesis that provides additional information on effective strategies with examples from Washington high schools.

Schools need to reflect the effective practices that form the basis of successful dropout programs. All students, not only those at-risk, will benefit from safe, warm, and caring learning environments, teachers who believe in them and their ability to learn well, teachers who do not give up on them, and a rich and challenging curriculum that is relevant to them. Schools must be places where student engagement is universal and where student membership is high.

### IMPLICATIONS

Reducing the dropout rate needs to be a high priority across the entire educational spectrum. Students who struggle in the early grades are more likely to drop out, so sound educational policies and practices need to exist throughout the K–12 system.

Schools and districts can begin by examining the effectiveness and unintended consequences of their own policies and practices. Areas to examine include discipline and attendance policies, the implementation of high standards, grading procedures, retention in grade, special education and remediation assignments, transitions between school levels, course content and instruction, school climate and relationships, and existing alternative programs. After conducting this work, policymakers, leaders, and other educators need to take the necessary and sometimes courageous steps to improve or change ineffective policies, practices, and programs or create new ones.

Broader efforts in school reform will also be necessary. These efforts include implementing the characteristics of effective schools, addressing the achievement gap, involving families and the community, accommodating personal crises, gathering and analyzing accurate data, providing sufficient resources, providing professional development opportunities, and designing effective targeted programs.

The state has provided some support in these areas, but it needs to expand its efforts to support dropout prevention and recovery programs and help develop appropriate curriculum and teaching strategies for these programs. The state can also support evaluations of programs and assist in increasing the effectiveness of alternative programs.

Increasing graduation rates and reducing dropout rates are worthy goals. Reaching those goals will require more resources, commitment, and political will. But reaching them will ensure that the individuals behind the statistics do not become “throw-away” children.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The federal requirements of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) focus attention on increasing graduation rates, which will require lower dropout rates. While the dropout problem has generated research and new programs over the last 30 years, the dropout rate has remained relatively unchanged. Students drop out of school for many reasons, and the characteristics of dropouts are often the same as students who do not drop out.

This report examines the research and professional literature on school dropouts to answer the following questions:

- Who is a dropout?
- How many students dropout in the U.S. and the state of Washington?
- Who drops out of schools and why do they drop out?
- What are promising strategies for reducing the number of dropouts?

The studies cited in this report provide findings, insights, and promising practices that will increase understanding of complex dropout issues. This review also provides information that can help school districts and educators develop policies, create programs, and improve schools in order to increase graduation rates and decrease the dropout rate.

### **DEFINITIONS**

Who is a dropout? A widely accepted definition of dropouts is students who quit school before high school graduation without diplomas and do not return. Washington uses the federal definition of dropout: “A dropout is a student who leaves school for any reason, except death, before completing school with a regular diploma and does not transfer to another school. A student is considered a dropout regardless of when dropping out occurs (i.e., during or between regular school terms). A student who leaves during the year but returns during the reporting period (including summer program) is not a dropout. Students who receive a GED certificate are also categorized as dropouts.” (Bylsma & Ireland, 2005, p. 6). Some students leave school before entering ninth grade, but most drop out during their high school years.

### **Methods Of Calculating Dropout Rates**

Definitions of dropout rates used in research studies vary according to computation and data collection methods. Three different methods are used to calculate dropout rates: event, cohort, and status. Adjustments are sometimes made to these rates by different researchers.

- *Event* dropout rates (also called an “annual” dropout rate) compute the number of students who dropped out of school in one year without completing an approved

high school program. This rate usually measures dropouts among all the high school grades (i.e., 9–12) in the year. The federal government requires states to report this rate, which is based on the total number of dropouts and enrollments across the four grades.

- Cohort dropout rates are based on the number of graduates within a group of students who began at the same time. Typically, a cohort dropout rate is the percentage of students who begin grade 9 in a given year but drop out of school before receiving a regular diploma, usually in a 4-year period (until the end of grade 12).
- Status dropout rates are calculated on the number of people who have not completed high school at a specific time regardless of when they left school. For example, a status dropout rate might be applied to people age 16–24 who are out of school and who have not earned a high school credential, including a GED certificate. The U.S. Census Bureau often uses this type of rate.

Some researchers calculate “holding power” to determine a high school’s success in maintaining student enrollment. Balfanz and Legters (2001) assert that a “school’s promotion rate is a more accurate means of determining school’s success.” Holding or promoting power is determined by comparing the number of students at two time periods, typically the number of 9<sup>th</sup> graders and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, or when the data are available, the number of high school graduates four years later. If the number of 12<sup>th</sup> graders is close to the number of students entering high school, a school has strong “holding power.” They argue, “Since schools are supposed to be in the business of promoting students rather than holding them ... it is semantically clearer and more accurate to refer to the comparison of the number of 9<sup>th</sup> graders to the number of 12<sup>th</sup> graders four years later as an indicator of ‘promoting power’ rather than ‘holding power.’” They contend that “very weak promoting power is a good first order indicator of a school with a significant dropout rate” (p. 4). They use the figure of 50% or fewer seniors than freshmen as their definition of a school with weak promoting power.

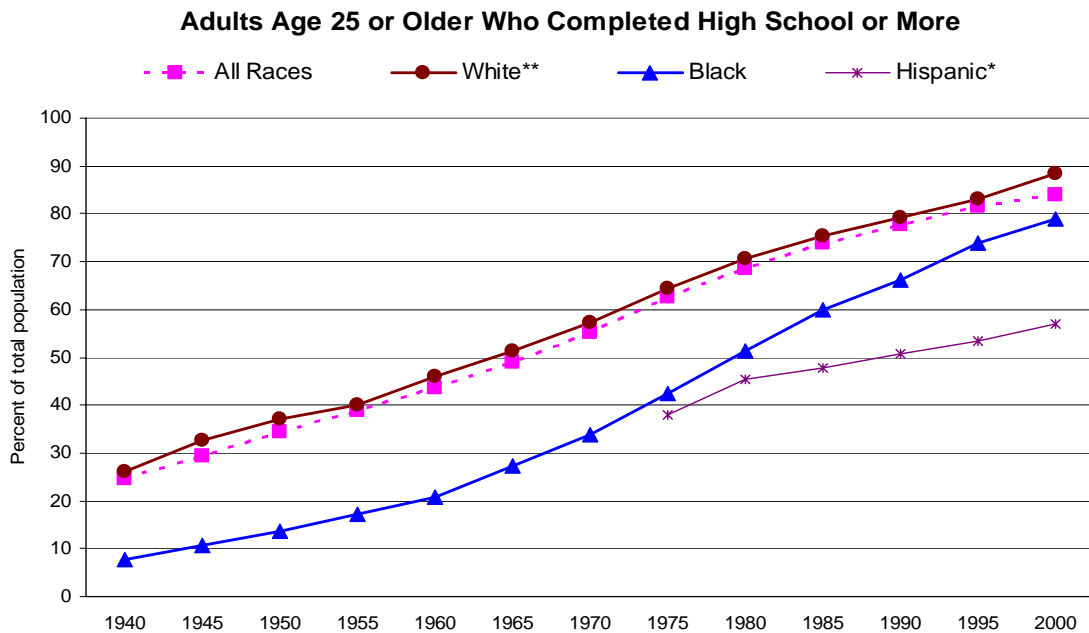
### **STUDYING DROPOUTS**

Over the past forty years, national interest and concern about students who drop out of school have waxed and waned. The perspectives of researchers who studied the dropout problem also have varied. In the 1960s and 1970s researchers examined the characteristics of individuals who left school early and the conditions that might predict their dropping out. The Nation at Risk report in 1983 and a host of subsequent studies describing the state of education in the country again heightened attention on dropouts. In the 1990s, the Goals 2000 initiative established a national goal for 90% graduation rate, again renewing attention on the dropout problem. The current climate created by *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation has raised the dropout issue again.

From a historical perspective, concern about dropouts is a relatively recent issue. Dropouts have been a phenomenon of American public schools, particularly secondary schools, since schools were established. In fact, leaving school was the “norm” in the past. Only about 6.4 percent of seventeen-year-olds were high school graduates in 1900 (Graham, 1987, in Fine, 1991). The term “dropout” surfaced first in the early 1900s but

did not become the “dominate term” until later in the twentieth century (Dorn, 1996). By the end of World War II, high schools were commonplace, and high school attendance and graduation were expected of the majority of adolescents in the country. Nevertheless, the vast majority of adults at that time had not completed high school, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: High School Completion Trends, 1940 to 2000**



\* No data available for 1940-1970

\*\* Data for 1945-1960 are estimates

Source: Data from Current Population Surveys, U.S. Census Bureau.

However, graduation rates steadily increased in the twentieth century. According to census data, the percent of all native-born residents age 20–24 with high school diplomas increased from 44 percent in 1940 to 64 percent in 1960 and to 85 percent in 1990 (Dorn, 1996). By 2000, the rate of high school graduates was 86 percent (National Research Council, 2001).

When high school graduation became the “rule” rather than the exception by the 1960s, failure to graduate was described as a “dropout problem.” Dorn asserts that the dropout problem was a construct, ironically “created” at the time of the highest rate of graduation in U.S. history. “High schools’ success led critics to expect more and charge it with failure in the very mission (absorbing adolescents) that it had so successfully undertaken” (p. 6).

As graduation rates increased, individual dropouts were considered “deviants.” They were viewed as psychologically or personally lacking, social misfits, who were a “drain on society.” Early concerns about dropouts appeared to be less for the impacts on the individual and family and more for the impacts on society and the economy (Wehlage et al., 1989; Wells, 1990, in Browning, 1999; West, 1991). A dropout stereotype

became prevalent by the mid-1960s that reflected the themes of unemployment, urban poverty, juvenile delinquency, crime, anti-social behavior and male adolescence (Dorn, 1996). Dropouts were also identified as problem students who did not learn efficiently, who misbehaved, were truant, delinquent, and failed (Deschenes, Tyack, & Cuban, 2001). Some writers added other descriptors: dropouts were students with low self-worth, low expectations, who saw little relevance in school, or felt they had little potential or hope for a successful future (Day, 2002; Schargel & Smink, 2001; West, 1991; and others). Some dropouts were students who had been actively pushed out of school due to a range of rules and regulations (Fine, 1986, 1991).

Early research studies focused primarily on the characteristics of students who dropped out and their family circumstances. Studies correlated high dropout rates with low socioeconomic status and certain racial and ethnic backgrounds. Personal issues, such as substance abuse, health problems, and learning disabilities were also correlated with dropping out (Wehlage et al., 1989). Recently studies have examined school organization and educational practices to determine their potential influence on students' leaving school. For example, school bureaucracy, such as enforcement of attendance and discipline policies, may force students out of school. Also, school size, structure, and environment may influence students' decisions to leave school early. These issues are examined more closely in Chapters 3 and 4.

### **COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF DROPPING OUT**

The costs and consequences of dropping out have become increasingly serious for individuals and for society. Although there has been concern in the past, authors are describing the current conditions with increasing urgency. Rumberger (2001) summarizes economic, demographic and educational trends that may exacerbate the dropout problem in the future. He notes (1) the trend is toward a higher skilled labor force in the United States that will make it even harder for dropouts economically; (2) school populations increasingly tend to be students who are poor and low-income, racial and ethnic minorities, or students who do not speak English as their primary language; and (3) increasing accountability in the schools is a trend that has "produced policies to end social promotion and to institute high school exit exams, both of which could increase the number of students who fail to complete high school ..." (p. 3). Other societal costs of dropout are lower productivity, lost taxes, and reduced participation in civic affairs.

Life's opportunities are severely limited for students who drop out. Such students are more likely to be unemployed and to earn less over their working life (Croninger & Lee, 2001). For example, the unemployment rate for dropouts in 1998 was 75 percent higher than for high school graduates. Earnings for dropouts who find jobs are considerably lower than for graduates (Rumberger, 2001, p. 3). According to Day & Newburger (2002), dropouts earned \$18,900 annually compared to \$25,900 for high school graduates, and \$45,400 for graduates of 4-year colleges (see Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> The differences in estimated earnings widen dramatically as they accumulate over the years

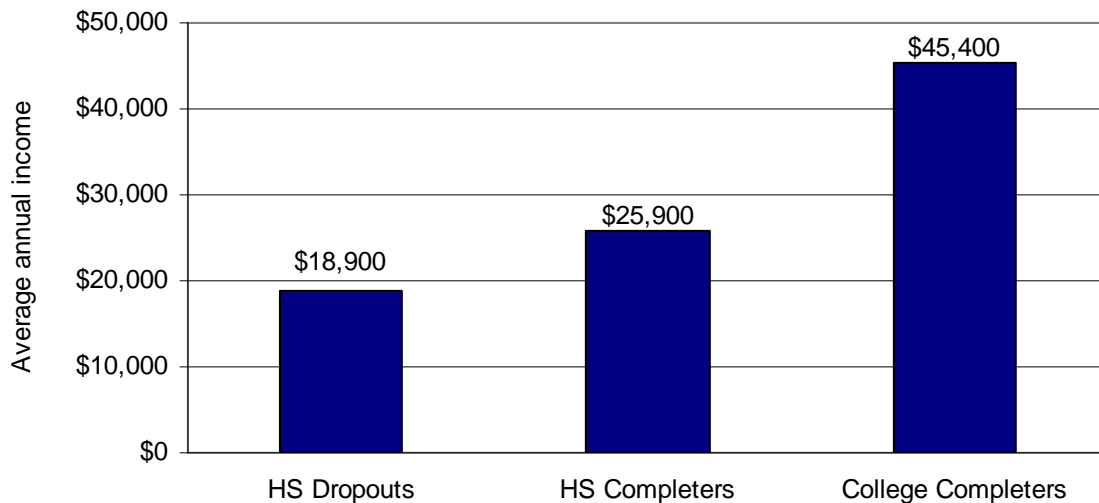
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<sup>2</sup> Figures are annual averages using 1997-1999 data in 1999 dollars.



of an individual's work life. The average earnings for non-high school graduates have declined from 1975 to 1999. They note that "technological changes favoring more skilled (and educated) workers have tended to increase earnings among working adults with higher educational attainment, while, simultaneously, the decline of labor unions and a decline in the minimum wage in constant dollars have contributed to a relative drop in the wages of less educated workers" (p. 3). Woods (1995) asserts, "The point is that the world has changed, and the system's current employment needs do not tolerate dropout rates that have not changed over the last 20 years" (p. 2).

**Figure 2: Annual Income by Education Level**



Figures are annual averages using 1997–1999 data in 1999 dollars.

Source: Data from Current Population Reports, Day & Newburger, July 2002.

Although many dropouts pursue a GED and educators may see the GED certification as a positive alternative, it does not adequately prepare young people for attaining well-paying employment or for accessing higher education. Numerous studies support these conclusions. Advocates for Children (2002) states, "Students with a GED generally earn considerably less salary, are more likely to be unemployed, and are more likely to be on public assistance. In addition, only 2 percent of GED holders obtain their Bachelor's Degree after obtaining entry into college" (p. 11).

In a synthesis of recent research on the economic benefits of the GED, Tyler (2003) writes the certificate is not equivalent to a regular diploma in the labor market. However, the studies conclude that GED holders have better labor market outcomes than dropouts with no credential, particularly those dropouts with very low skills. The studies also indicate that "GED holders who participate in postsecondary education do relatively well and see positive returns on this education, but that most GED holders obtain very little postsecondary education" (p. 375).

In addition to economic and employment considerations, individual dropouts and society as a whole experience negative social and personal consequences of dropping out. Dropouts tend to experience higher levels of premature sexual activity, early pregnancy, and substance abuse, and they tend to require more social services of various types (Woods, 1995). In an analysis of 2002 Washington state data, Pruitt (2003) found that 17 percent of high school dropouts received food stamps compared to 8 percent of individuals with a diploma. Also, 12 percent of high school dropouts were on public assistance while less than 9 percent of those with a diploma received such assistance. Young people who are imprisoned or sentenced to adult prisons are likely to be school dropouts. In 1997, approximately 68 percent of the inmates in state prisons had not completed high school and “75 percent of youths under 18 who have been sentenced to adult prisons have not completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade” (Wald & Losen, 2003, p. 4).

### **CAUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS REPORT**

The research and professional literature are extensive and span decades. Although this report draws on only a portion of those studies, efforts have been made to provide a thorough discussion of the issues. Dropout studies have rarely been experimental in nature, and causal relationships have not been proven. Evidence of program effectiveness is often anecdotal or correlational. However, much can be learned from the research studies and reports that can be applied to schools and classrooms.

Limited access to the primary sources has made it necessary to rely upon secondary sources that summarize research findings. Whenever possible, primary sources have been used. Lastly, the technical merit of all the studies that have been cited has not been evaluated.

This document has been written primarily for the school and classroom practitioner. However, there are policy-level implications that require consideration at school district and state levels. The report provides a foundation for a better understanding of dropout issues and suggests some concrete and practical actions that can be taken by the educators and school districts who have responsibility for the successful learning of all students.

Finally, this report does not contain complete data on graduation and dropout rates for Washington State, although some summary information is provided in Chapter 2. This report is a companion to the *Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington’s Counties, Districts, and Schools, School Year 2003–2004*, published by OSPI in September 2005 (available at <http://www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/default.aspx>).

## CHAPTER 2

# DROPOUT RATES IN THE U.S. AND WASHINGTON STATE

Estimates of school dropouts range widely, depending on who is counting, who is counted, and how and why they are counted. As discussed in Chapter 1, there are different methods for estimating dropout rates. This accounts for the wide range of estimates. The literature on dropouts describes the difficulties in finding accurate numbers, regardless of the method. The problems can be linked to how dropouts are defined as well as record keeping practices (e.g., the process of keeping track of individual students who may transfer to other schools).

Although the percentage of youth who left school before graduation decreased continually from 1972 to 1987, the current estimated dropout rates are significant and generally seen as unacceptable. In the 1940s, less than half of individuals age 25–29 had completed high school. By the early 1970s, about 84 percent of adults age 18–24 had completed high school. In 2000, the completion rate for white adults age 18–24 was 91.8 percent. In comparison, the Black completion rate in 2000 was 83.7 percent; the Hispanic rate was 64.1 percent; and the Asian rate was 94.6. (These statistics do not include GED estimates). Although there are fluctuations year to year, the percentage of students dropping out has remained quite stable since 1987 (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2002). In 29 years, the completion rate has increased only about 3 percentage points, showing “slow progress toward improvement in the national high school completion rates” (NCES, 2001).

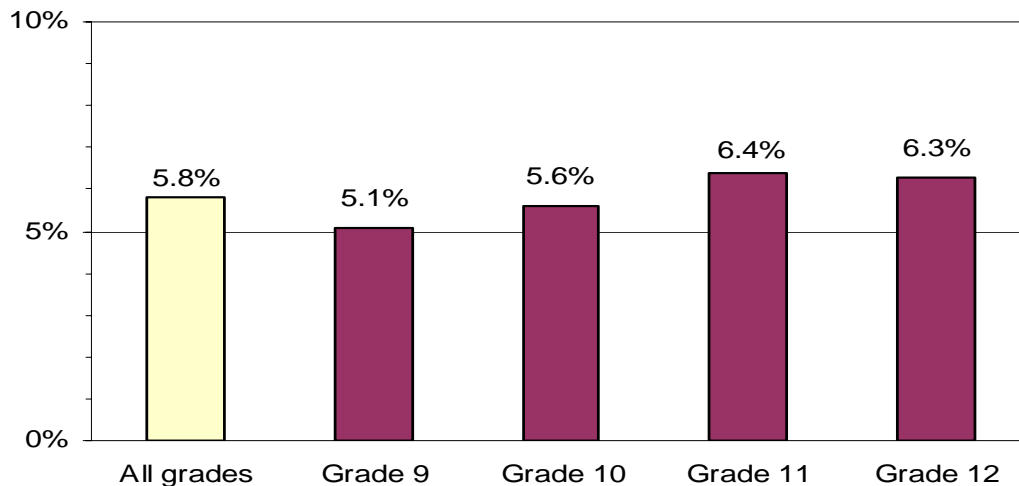
The most recent national dropout estimates range from as low as 4 percent to 30 percent, depending upon the methods and definitions used. NCES (2002) cites dropout rates for 24 states in 1999–2000 as ranging from 4 to 6 percent. These rates apply to students in grades 7–12 rather than 9–12, which results in a lower than expected rate. (States that do not calculate dropouts using the NCES definitions are not included in the reports.) Other researchers report national dropout rates of 25 percent to 30 percent (Random, 1986; Sum et al., 2003; Weis, Farrar, & Petrie, 1989). The estimates of 4-6 percent refer to annual rates (what happens in one year across all grades) while the dropout rates in the 25–30 percent range are cohort rates.

### **DROPOUT AND GRADUATION RATES IN WASHINGTON**

Determining how many students drop out in Washington requires counting students who leave school without graduating. Estimates of dropouts in the state of Washington differ in various reports depending upon the methodology used.

OSPI's Research and Evaluation Office recently reported graduation and dropout data for the state, counties, districts, and schools for the 2003–04 school year.<sup>3</sup> The report estimated the annual dropout rate for grades 9–12 statewide was 5.8 percent. Figure 3 provides data for each grade. It shows the dropout rate gradually increasing over time—the smallest percentage of students dropped out of school in Grade 9 (5.1%) and the highest percentage dropped out in grade 11 and 12.

**Figure 3: Percent Dropouts in Washington by Grade  
(School Year 2003-2004)**



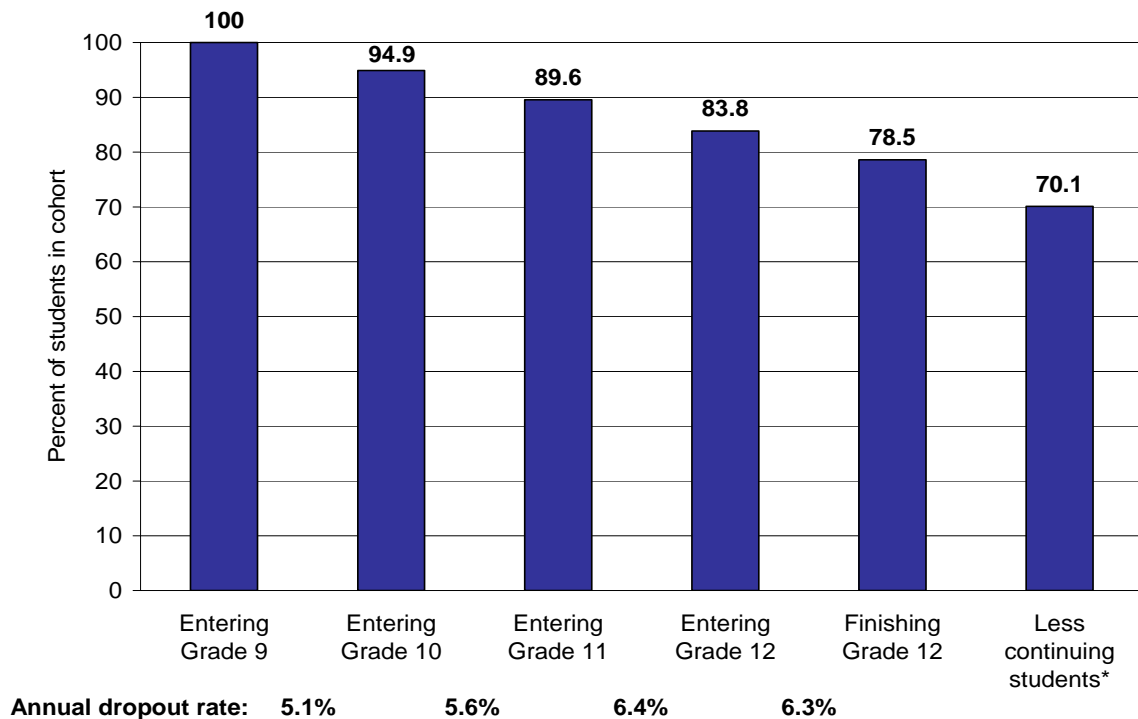
Source: *Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington's Counties, Districts, and Schools, School Year 2003-04*, Bylsma & Ireland.

The *State Profiles of Child Well-Being* reported by Population Reference Bureau for the Kids Count website reports the percentage of teens who are high school dropouts. Based on the 2000 census, the Profile reports that in Washington 8.7 percent of teens age 16–19 dropped out, compared to 9.8 percent in the United States. The U.S. percentage is a decrease from the 1990 rate when 10.6 percent of teens age 16–19 were reported as dropouts (Mather & Rivers, 2003).

OSPI reported that 70 percent of the Class of 2004 graduated “on-time” with a regular diploma or adult diploma. In other words, 70 percent of Washington students that began grade 9 in the fall of 2000 graduated from high school four years later in the spring or summer of 2004. This rate is an estimate because it is computed using the dropout rates for each of the grades in one year (which assumes the present rates were those that occurred in the past) and the percentage of students that were still enrolled at the end of grade 12 (see Figure 4).

<sup>3</sup> OSPI publishes an annual report with information on dropout and completion rates for each school, district, and for the state. The information is available on its website at <http://www.k12.wa.us/dataadmin/>.

**Figure 4: Estimated On-Time Graduation Rate in Washington  
(Class of 2004)**



\* A total of 10.1% of the grade 12 students were still enrolled in school at the end of the year, which represents 8.5% of the cohort.

Source: Analysis of data in *Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington's Counties, Districts, and Schools, School Year 2003-04*, Bylsma & Ireland.

Other reports have focused on graduation rates without providing a dropout rate per se. The Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission released a study that estimated the state graduation rate for the Class of 2001 as 70 percent. In other words, 70 percent of Washington students that began grade 9 in the fall of 1997 graduated from high school four years later (Bourguignon & Celio, 2002). The study did not estimate the dropout rate.

Using another methodology, the Manhattan Institute estimated the on-time graduation rate for the Class of 2001 in Washington was 67 percent. Greene (2002) estimated graduation rates by “comparing how many students enter high school to the number of graduates when those students should be receiving their diplomas, making some adjustments for population changes in the graduating cohort.” This study implies that graduation should take place in four years. The study did not estimate a dropout rate for the cohort. A 2003 Manhattan Institute study used the same methodology to estimate the on-time graduation rate for all states and estimated a national rate for the class of 2001 of 70 percent (Greene & Forster, 2003). The Urban Institute and the Business Roundtable have also recently estimated state and national graduation rates and arrived

at similar results (Swanson, 2003; Sum et al., 2003). More information on these rates is provided in Appendix A.

Taken together, the above studies reveal that roughly two-thirds of Washington's students graduate in a four-year period. Those who don't are likely to be dropouts rather than students continuing their education or completing school another way.

### **DROPOUT AND GRADUATION RATES BY RACE AND ETHNICITY**

In general, students of color have much higher dropout rates than white students, both nationally and in Washington state. In 2000, the estimated national annual or *event* dropout rate in grades 10-12 was lowest for Asian/Pacific Islanders (3.5 percent). The annual dropout rate for Black students was 6.1; Hispanics had a rate of 7.4 percent. White students had a 4.1 percent dropout rate (NCES 2002).

The national *status* dropout rate for 16 to 24 year-olds (the percentage who are out of school and who have not earned a high school credential, including the GED certificate) can also be used for making comparisons among groups. For example, the status dropout rate in 2000 for Hispanics was 28 percent, 13 percent for Blacks, and 7 percent for whites. The status dropout rate for Hispanics declined by 7 percentage points between 1972 and 2000, while the rate for whites declined by 5 percentage points and by 8 percentage points for Blacks (NCES, 2003a).

The high Hispanic status dropout rate is partly attributable to the much higher dropout rates among Hispanic immigrants. Even though more than one-half of Hispanic immigrants never enrolled in a U.S. school, they are included as dropouts if they have not completed high school in their country of origin. The 2001 status dropout rate for Hispanics born outside the United States (43%) is higher than the rate for first generation Hispanic youth (15%). However, among youth born in the United States, both first- and second-generation Hispanics are still more likely to drop out than their counterparts of other races/ethnicities (NCES, 2003b). The recent report from the Pew Hispanic Center confirms this more accurate picture of the Hispanic dropout rate. Though the 15 percent rate for first generation Hispanics is still twice as high as the rate for comparable non-Hispanic whites, it is significantly lower than the 30 percent rate frequently reported for Hispanics overall (Fry, 2003). However, 1998 NCES data show that Hispanic dropout rates are at least double those of other Americans in the same income categories (Lockwood & Secada, 1999). "Wealthy Hispanics are *twice as likely* as wealthy whites or wealthy African Americans to drop out of school without a diploma" (p. 2).

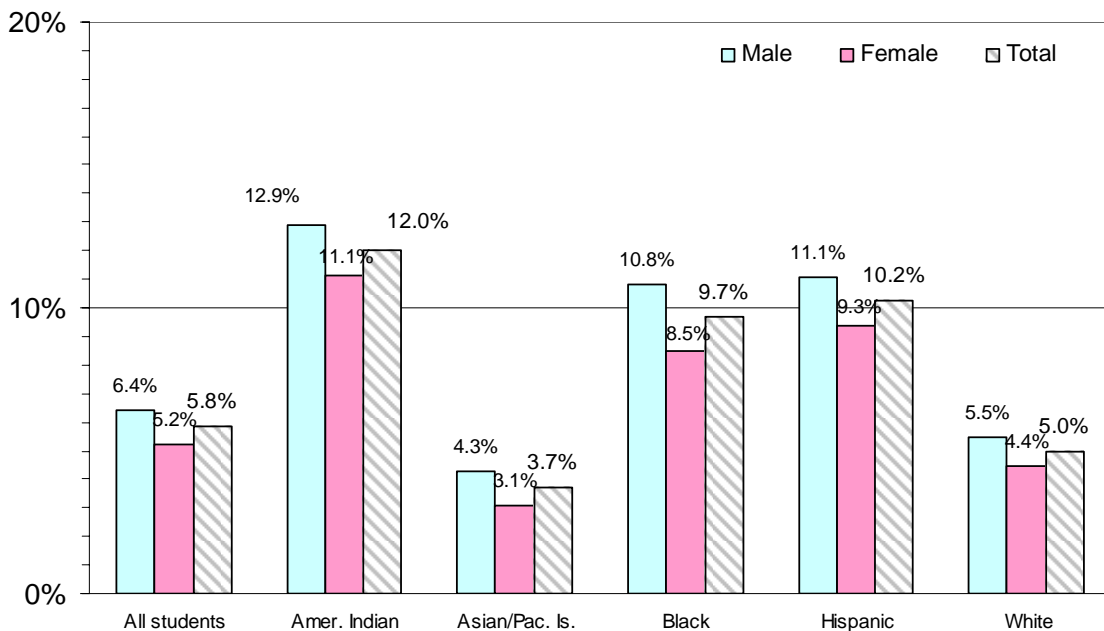
Nationally, high school completion rates have increased in a similar manner for each racial/ethnic group over the past 30 years. Completion rates for white students climbed from about 86 percent in the early 1970s to about 90 percent in 1990. Since 1990, the rates have remained stable at 90–92 percent. The high school completion rate for white young adults in 2000 was 91.8 percent (NCES, 2002).

Although graduation rates for students of color increased over the last 30 years, the rates continue to lag behind whites. Completion rates for Black young adults rose from 72 percent in 1972 to 83 percent in 1990. The Black completion rate in 2000 was 83.7 percent. The gap between Black and white completion rates narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the completion rates for both whites and Blacks appear to have stabilized in recent years, the gap between the two groups has remained about the same. In contrast, the percentage of Hispanic youth completing high school is relatively low. Although the 2000 rate was significantly higher than in 1972 (64% compared to 56%), the overall completion rates for Hispanics have not shown a consistent trend over the last 30 years (NCES, 2002).

Dropout Rates Among Race/Ethnic Groups in Washington

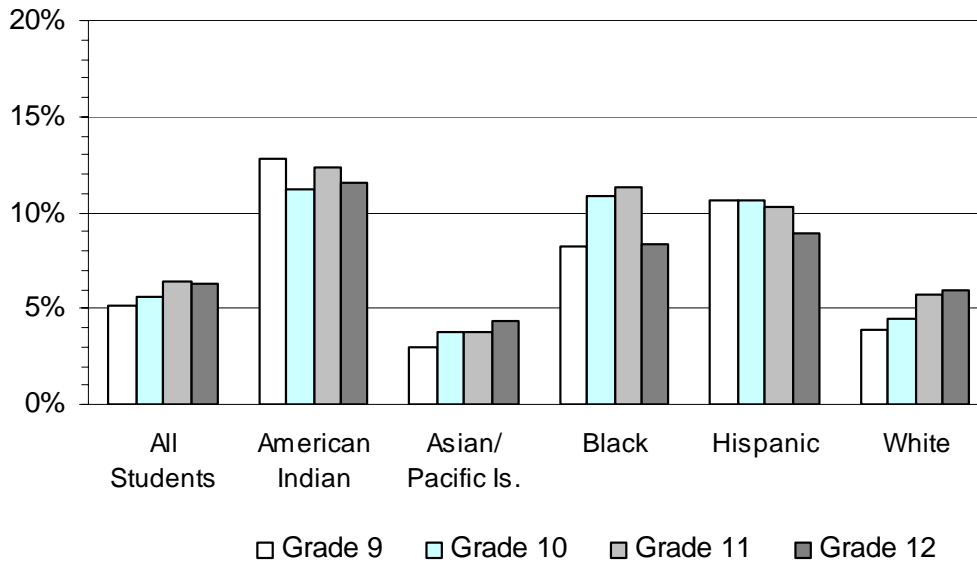
According to OSPI, the annual dropout rates for grades 9–12 in school year 2003–2004 were higher for American Indian, African American, and Hispanic students than for Asian and white students (see Figures 5-6 and Table 1). Asian/Pacific Islanders had the lowest dropout rate (3.7%), followed by white students (5.0%). The annual rates for the other three groups in grades 9–12 much higher (Bylsma & Ireland, 2005). The rates are higher for males than females.

**Figure 5: Washington Dropout Rates by Gender and Race/Ethnicity, Grades 9–12 (School Year 2003–2004)**



Note: These percentages are based on the total number of students served during the school year and exclude students who transferred out of a school to avoid duplicate counts.

**Figure 6: Washington Dropout Rates by Grade and Race/Ethnicity (School Year 2003–2004)**



Source: *Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington's Counties, Districts, and Schools, School Year 2003-04*, Bylsma & Ireland.

**Table 1: Washington Dropout Rates by Grade and Race/Ethnicity Grades 9–12 (School Year 2003–2004)**

Race/Ethnicity	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Annual dropout rate
Amer. Indian	12.8%	11.2%	12.3%	11.5%	<b>12.0%</b>
Asian/Pacific Is.	3.0%	3.8%	3.8%	4.3%	<b>3.7%</b>
Black	8.2%	10.9%	11.3%	8.4%	<b>9.7%</b>
Hispanic	10.6%	10.6%	10.3%	8.9%	<b>10.2%</b>
White	3.9%	4.5%	5.7%	5.9%	<b>5.0%</b>

Source: *Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington's Counties, Districts, and Schools, School Year 2003-04*, Bylsma & Ireland.

### **GRADUATION RATES UNDER NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND**

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) requires states to use the cohort on-time graduation rate as an additional indicator besides assessment results when making adequate yearly progress (AYP) determinations. This indicator applies to grades 9–12 and cannot include students who complete their education with a GED certificate (these students must be counted as dropouts). NCLB does not require states to establish a goal or target for dropout rates, although graduation and dropout rates are closely linked.



NCLB does not require a 100 percent graduation rate by a certain year. Instead, it allows each state to establish its own annual goals for the cohort graduation rate. Washington has established a goal of 85 percent to be achieved by each race/ethnic group by 2014. Until that time, lower goals have been set (OSPI, 2003).<sup>4</sup> Disaggregated rates for each race/ethnic group are not needed unless that group has not met one of the proficiency indicators.<sup>5</sup>

The new law has placed a greater focus and sense of urgency on reducing the dropout rate. In the past, the enrollment status of students has not been examined very closely or reported very accurately, and the graduation and dropout rates have not been used for accountability purposes. Districts and schools must now give more attention to keeping track of their students, reporting their enrollment status accurately, and finding ways to help students stay in school and graduate. The implementation of a new state core student record system in school year 2003–04 has helped track students that move from one location to another, which can change the status of some students from unknowns or dropouts to transfers or completers. This provides a better picture of the nature of the dropout problem.

But first, educators need to have a better understanding of who drops out and why they do so. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the professional and research literature about students who drop out and the conditions that contribute to the dropout problem.

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<sup>4</sup> An on-time graduation rate of 66 percent was required for the Class of 2004 for each school and district in Washington to make AYP in 2005. If a school or district rate is below that level, it can still make AYP if the rate has improved at least two percentage points from the previous year. The required rate begins to increase beginning with the Class of 2005 until it reaches 85 percent in 2014.

<sup>5</sup> This concept is known as “safe harbor.” To make AYP via safe harbor, a group must reduce the percentage of students who are not proficient by at least 10 percent from the previous year and the group must meet the goal of the other indicator (the graduation rate goal for high schools).

## CHAPTER 3

# CHARACTERISTICS OF DROPOUTS AND CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Studies over the past forty years have grappled with the questions of who drops out and why they do so. Despite a body of research that attempts to answer these questions, studies have been inconclusive. The professional and research literature, however, suggest relevant factors that are useful for educators and policy makers who want to understand the complex issue of student dropout. This chapter synthesizes a number of research studies that consider the impact of “individual” factors such as student, family, and community characteristics. Chapter 4 summarizes the research on education-related or “institutional” factors that contribute to students’ leaving school early. Studies generally focus on a particular perspective, although individual and institutional factors are interrelated and often interact with one another.

In studying dropout from an individual perspective, researchers have examined social and academic factors, demographic characteristics, and the capacity of the family and student to adjust to their circumstances. Generally, studies conclude that students of color and those in low-income families are at greater risk of dropping out than their white, more affluent counterparts. However, care must be taken in predicting who will drop out. One should not assume that because students come from a specific background that they are destined to drop out. The relationship between those risk factors and students leaving school is “not linear or foolproof” (Beatty et al., 2001). “Using individual risk factors is tricky: research that has evaluated the predictive value of risk factors has shown that the one ‘that was best able to predict whether middle school students were dropouts—high absenteeism—correctly identified dropouts only 16 percent of the time’” (Dynarski, 2000, cited in Beatty et al., p. 19). Personal, family, economic and sociocultural factors are discussed separately in the following sections, although these factors are interrelated and overlapping, or “bundled” (Alexander et al., 2001).

As a context for this chapter and the next, we begin with a brief historical view of research on why students drop out of school.

### **OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON WHY STUDENTS DROP OUT**

Research on why students leave school early has a long history, and perspectives on the issue have varied over the years. *Laggards in Our Schools* was an early study of dropout and non-promotion in elementary schools (Ayres, 1909). *When Youth Leave School* was written by Eckert and Marshall in the 1930s. Both of these early studies characterized the problem of dropout or school holding power as one of “school reform” (Wehalge et al., 1989). Researchers in the 1960s and years following “examined a sample of dropouts in terms of the personal and social characteristics they had in common” (p. 35). This approach focused on the students and their family

circumstances as the root of the problem. Later research examined schools and policies associated with dropout. Some studies emphasized the interaction between the individual and the school in relation to dropping out.

By the mid-1960s researchers interested in the relationship between family circumstances and school achievement had contributed to a profile of school dropouts that produced a stereotypical view (Roderick, 1993). Dropouts were characterized by their “psychological defects” that were seen as the “primary distinction between dropouts or graduates” (Dorn, 1996, p. 67-68). Dropping out was linked with unemployment, urban poverty, juvenile delinquency, and adolescent males.

The literature on dropout underscores the disconnect between traditional schools, which largely reflect white middle-class culture, and certain segments of the population, such as minority and low-income groups (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Shannon & Bylsma, 2002; Williams, 1996). Farrell (1990) asserts that schools are created by educators who designed the “right places for the right students” who look very much like themselves. He describes dropouts as students who are in the wrong places at the wrong times. According to another report, “there have always been students who do not meet the educational expectations of their time—students outside the mainstream mold who do not fit dominant notions of success. The differences between schools and these students can be thought of as a ‘mismatch’ between the structure of schools and the social, cultural or economic backgrounds of students identified as problems” (Deschenes, Tyack, & Cuban, 2001, p. 1).

Researchers have looked within schools to identify factors that contribute to students’ dropping out (Deschenes et al., 2001; Farrell, 1990; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Wehlage et al., 1989; Wells, 1990). According to Smith (1991), “In schools where many students fail, are retained, or are suspended or expelled, dropout rates are higher. Students therefore do not drop out in isolation from the school; they drop out as a result of their interaction with the teachers, administrators, peers, and activities they encounter there” (p. 44). School policies and practices (i.e. discipline and attendance procedures, promotion and retention policies, tracking), curriculum content, and student engagement and school membership are among school factors that have been linked to student decisions to drop out.

Some current research studies have investigated the nature of dropping out itself. Some studies conclude that dropping out is the result of a gradual process; others point out that there may be circumstances that in effect trigger dropping out. One study calls the gradual process “a life course perspective” and suggests that cumulative experiences shape students over time (Alexander et al., 1993). Other researchers describe the process as a series of phases. “Dropping out initially begins with students deviating from the social norm of school behavior, followed by ceasing their participation in school activities, failing to identify with school values, alienating themselves from the school community, and finally disconnecting from the school community” (Lan & Lanthier, 2003, p. 313). The experiences of students over their school career are impacted by the interaction of their personal and family circumstances along with the school context. Some researchers have called this a reciprocal relationship between the student and the school that impacts dropping out (Natriello, Pallas, & McDill, 1986).

However, some researchers caution that, individually, dropouts may not fit the at-risk profile. Students whose grades have been average or higher, who have good attendance, have no behavior problems, and no health problems also leave school early. Roderick (1993) explains that when the characteristics of dropouts in their sophomore years were examined as a group, the majority reported they did not have excessive truancies, did not fail classes, and were interested in school. Roderick provides these statistics for students in her study: “(1) 56.6 percent of dropouts reported that they had missed less than four days of non-illness related absences in the fall; (2) 60.3 percent of dropouts reported that they received mostly ‘B’s and C’s’ or better in their sophomore years; and (3) 60 percent of dropouts reported that they were interested in school” (p. 28). For these students, something apparently acted as a “trigger” to prompt their leaving school. Roderick points to the transitions that occur between levels, such as moving from middle to high school, as contributing to dropping out. Other case studies suggest social and personal experiences as causes.

Wehlage et al. (1989) report an example that illustrates a “trigger” for a student who did not reflect most risk factors. This student was from a middle class family, tested above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile in math and reading on standardized tests, and was on track for college. Her mother had a college degree and her father was an accountant. She attributed dropping out of junior high school primarily to the ridicule she received from students and teachers in relation to her physical appearance. (She was subsequently enrolled in the alternative school in the study.)

Wehlage et al. also warn against harboring simplistic views about dropouts. The problem involves many populations beyond inner-city minority groups, and the correlational studies that emphasize race and home status as risk factors overlook the complex reasons that can lead to a student dropping out. Moreover, students with these risk factors may be labeled mistakenly, and students may be at risk for other reasons but are overlooked because they do not meet these identifiers. Lastly, many studies do not identify the school as a contributor to students’ dropping out. Approaches to describing dropouts tend to blame the “students and their home backgrounds rather than recognizing that the school also must be held accountable for the educational progress of all students” (p. 49-50).

Although the perspectives of the individual student and the school context are interrelated, they will be considered separately in this chapter and the next. This chapter focuses on the individual perspective, which are categorized into personal, family, economic, and sociocultural factors.

### **PERSONAL FACTORS**

Studies have demonstrated a high correlation between dropping out and certain personal characteristics, including both social and academic factors. Risk of dropping out is linked to negative self-perceptions or low self-esteem, low aspirations, being bored or alienated by school, and pursuing alternatives such as taking jobs or helping families. Students who leave school often exhibit poor academic achievement and poor

school attendance, have repeated one or more grades, are English language learners, have learning problems, attend school in large cities, or become pregnant (Durian & Butler, 1987; Schargel & Smink, 2001; Schwartz, 1995; Wehlage et al., 1989; West, 1991).

Many students who drop out express negative attitudes about school. They consider the coursework irrelevant, don't like school, don't get along with teachers or other students, don't feel safe and/or don't feel they fit in. Sometimes they indicate that peer pressure and personal problems, including drugs or alcohol, interfere with school (Schwartz, 1995). Many dropouts say that schoolwork was not too difficult for them, but it was boring or not a priority (Farrell, 1990; Gallagher, 2002; Wehlage et al., 1989). Dropouts are more likely than students who stay in school to project an external locus of control. For example, they tend to agree with the statement "Good luck is more important than hard work for success" rather than feeling a sense of their own efficacy (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 386).

The "real world" context in which young people live competes with school for time and attention. "Hanging out" may tempt students to miss school. Gang and drug cultures may also interfere with school. Outside activities may be much more attractive than school to students, particularly those who have had negative experiences in school. Also, out-of-school life events are more adult oriented and in stark contrast to how students are treated in schools (Alexander et al., 2001; Farrell, 1990, 1994).

Finn (1989) proposed the frustration-self-esteem model for explaining withdrawal from school. He suggests that unsuccessful school outcomes, which may be impacted by deficient school practices, lead to reduced self-esteem which leads to problem behavior, and subsequently withdrawal from school. Studies suggest that self-esteem of some dropouts increased after they left school (Eckstrom et al., 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). A study that followed dropouts over time found that the youth who are similar to the dropouts but who remained in school actually reported less growth in self-esteem than either the dropouts or college-bound students. If their school experiences have been marked by failure and conflict, leaving school for a different, more positive environment is likely to be appealing (Wehlage & Rutter). Some students report that dropping out is a positive action because they feel they are taking control of their lives (Eckstrom et al., 1986; Fine, 1991; Gallagher, 2002). Wehlage & Rutter point out "the act of rejecting an institution as fundamental to the society as school must also be accompanied by the belief that the institution has rejected the person" (p. 385).

Transition periods (e.g., home to school, elementary to middle school, middle to high school) and the child's responses to what may be traumatic experiences are associated with risk of dropping out. Researchers suggest that even the transition from "home child" to "school child" at the beginning of school may impact later school success. Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997) studied the educational progress of students from first grade in 1982 through spring 1996. They point out that parental practices and children's behavior, even in first grade, are linked with later school performance, including dropping out. They examined data regarding family changes, school changes, student deportment and engagement in school in the first years of school as potential

precursors to dropping out. These measures were found to influence dropout “independently of socio-demographic factors and account for much of the difference in the odds of dropout associated with family socioeconomic status, gender, family type, and other ‘risk factors’” (p. 1).

Roderick (1994) also emphasizes the importance of transition periods to students’ experiences in school, particularly middle to high school. She distinguishes between early-grade and late-grade dropouts. Early grade dropouts (students who leave school between seventh and ninth grade or during ninth grade) often have experienced poor grades and perhaps retention as early as fourth grade. For these students, their performance worsens quite rapidly through middle school. Late grade dropouts (those leaving school in grades 10–12) and graduates did not differ in trends in their average grades during middle school. However, for all dropouts, school performance “dropped dramatically following transition to high school” (p. xix).

### **FAMILY FACTORS**

Certain family circumstances are associated with higher risk of dropping out. Children in single-parent or impoverished homes, whose families are mobile, who experience trauma (e.g. divorce, abuse, illness, unemployment), or have a family history of dropouts have higher risk for dropping out (Schargel & Smink, 2001; West, 1991). “(F)amily socioeconomic level bears by far the strongest relation to dropout; but family structure, mother’s age, family stress and maternal employment also enhance or reduce dropout risk, along with other academic and personal resources . . . ,” according to Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) who conducted the Beginning School Study, a long-term study of dropouts in Baltimore. Conversely, “a stable family and good academic performance at the start of school . . . improve the graduation prospects of disadvantaged youths.” These researchers found that “risk escalates as the number of risk factors in the family context increases (e.g., low SES, high levels of family stress, residence in a single parent household), but also that favorable conditions (e.g., high levels of parental support, good school performance) offset the adverse effects of social structural disadvantage (e.g., low family SES)” (p. 2).

Some sociologists contend that social capital, in the form of relationships within families, reduces the odds of dropping out of school. Some studies have found that parenting practices also promote student achievement. For example, students whose parents monitor and regulate their activities, provide emotional support, encourage independent decision-making, and generally are more involved in their school are less likely to drop out of school (Rumberger, 2001). Alexander et al. conclude that “parenting strategies adopted by low-income parents can insulate their children by promoting positive school adaptations and/or preventing anti-school adaptations . . . ” (p. 764). These researchers emphasize the efficacy of families. “Parents who are materially poor can and do act in ways that support their children’s schooling, and their children too play a role in directing their own academic development” (p. 806).

However, students may be caught between competing family and school demands. Many families pull adolescents, particularly daughters, from school to fill needs at

home (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Fine & Zane, 1989). Students may supplement income, tend to siblings, or care for aged family members. Several studies document these personal experiences and the resulting conflict with inflexible school policies that do not accommodate personal crises. One study described the experiences of a young man who was the caregiver for his grandmother. When the grandmother had major surgery and needed follow-up procedures, he left school because “I can’t concentrate and got to help her.” The school counselor explained his leaving school, “Jose got overinvolved, and was irresponsible about his own education” (Fine, 1986, p. 400). A teen mother is described in the study by Wehlage et al. (1989). Her dropping out resulted from the conflicting demands of being a responsible parent and meeting the attendance requirements of school. The bureaucratic procedures of the school did not or could not accommodate the needs of a young parent. Another view of this tension is offered by Alexander et al. who noted that many of the out-of-school adult-like roles students must assume may make the “dependent students’ role seem awfully confining,” so staying in school seems an unattractive option after experiencing a “taste of adulthood” (p. 803).

Mobility also adds to students’ risk of dropping out. “Mobility can foster another kind of instability only rarely discussed in the at-risk literature. Even with a supportive family, students can experience serious disorientation after moving away from a community of peers who provided social identity” (Wehlage, 1989, p. 61). According to data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, second follow-up, “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” (Schwartz, 1995).

Gender roles as reinforced by family also can impact school completion. Romo (1998) cites several authors that emphasize the impact of family, particularly mothers, on Hispanic girls. Latinas often “experience conflicts among traditional roles of motherhood, family responsibilities and academic success.” Therefore, even high achievers may think about dropping out. Several studies report that “. . . gender attitudes signal whether girls will pursue stereotypical vocations and familial paths or seek higher education and careers” (p. 1).

### **ECONOMIC FACTORS**

Economic and social-cultural factors also may affect dropout. According to Rumberger (2001) there are two approaches to explaining differences in dropout rates among racial and ethnic groups: socioeconomic and sociocultural. The socioeconomic approach includes differences in resources and human and social capital. From the sociocultural view, differences in family and community characteristics contribute to differences in dropout rates between racial groups. This section looks at economic factors, including the impact of poverty, student employment and jobs as an incentive for completing school. Sociocultural factors are examined in the next section.

### Impact of Poverty

The research and professional literature stress the impact of poverty on dropping out. In 1993, the Casey Foundation reported that “students from low-income families are three times as likely to drop out of school as those from more affluent homes. Female students who come from families in the lowest SES quartile drop out of school at five times the rate of females from the highest quartile. Male students in the lowest quartile drop out at two and a half time the rate of those in the highest quartile” (cited in Schargel & Smink, 2001, p. 21). “In 2000, young adults living in families with incomes in the lowest 20 percent of all family incomes were six times as likely as their peers from families in the top 20 percent of the income distribution to drop out of high school” (NCES, 2000, p. 6).

Wehlage et al. (1989) emphasize the disconnect between home and school experienced by children in poverty. They write, “It is the children of the poor who often experience the least congruence between their homes and neighborhoods, and their school experiences. This incongruence is particularly visible in a stark lack of familiarity with the skills and knowledge often taken for granted by people who have grown up in more affluent surroundings” (p. 58). “These students experience a discontinuity between experiences they have encountered in their own neighborhoods and the expectations of the school or workplace. Unless recognized and then bridged, this discontinuity can lead to protracted academic failure or minimal achievement.” They emphasize, “For minority students in particular, this disjuncture can be painful and frightening. Success in school often means rejecting family and peers, and for the majority, this choice is unacceptable” (p. 60). Other authors concur. St. Germaine (1995) stresses the profound impact of poverty on American Indian and Alaska Native students and the likelihood they complete school. Lockwood and Secada (1999) describe the conditions of severe poverty faced by many Hispanic students and the effects on their education.

Stanton-Salazar (1997) explains the nature of socioeconomic barriers that interfere with students’ succeeding in school. He writes, “Socioeconomic barriers are erected when economic circumstances prevent the young person from fully participating in the daily life of the school’s social world, especially those circumstances that impede the formation of prosocial and supportive relations with adult agents and high status peers. These circumstances may have to do with working outside the home, with not having the economic resources to participate in the school’s extracurricular activities, or with being treated as an inferior because of visible markers that communicate the student’s low socioeconomic status (e.g., dress, speech, family automobile)” (p. 18).

### Impact of Student Employment

Although investigated with contradictory results, student employment may decrease the chances of some students’ graduating. According to Stern (1997), “most evidence indicates that high school students working more than 15 or 20 hours a week suffer academically: they have lower grades, do less homework, are more likely to drop out, or are less likely to complete postsecondary education. Students who work fewer hours seem to suffer fewer negative consequences” (p. 1). McNeal (1997) found the odds of



dropping out for student workers was estimated to be 30 percent higher than nonworkers. His study also concludes that the type of employment has some influence on dropping out. “Students who were employed in retail, service, manufacturing and other occupations were all more likely to drop out than were nonworkers, and those employed in lawn work/odd jobs were significantly less likely to drop out.” In this study males were “significantly less likely to drop out than females after academic performance was controlled” (p. 6). Although the argument is often made that students work to help support families, one researcher reports that only three percent of the students actually contributed earnings toward family living expenses (Kelly, 1993).

### Flawed Incentives

Financial status or jobs are often used as incentives for convincing students to remain in school. Traditional incentives for completing high school—generally to attend college or to find good-paying jobs—may not motivate some students to stay in school, particularly students in poverty-stricken communities with limited opportunities. If no or few good jobs exist in a community, students may see little benefit for studying hard and staying in school, especially if the classes seem irrelevant to them (Fine, 1986, 1991; Farrell, 1991). Fine (1986) writes, “Many adolescents in and out of school understand that a high school diploma guarantees neither job security nor income” (p. 399). Another viewpoint is expressed by a young man interviewed for a study on adolescents. He said, “When asked, ‘Why do we need to learn this?’ teachers should not tell their students that it is to get a good job and earn a lot of money. I’m an urban kid, and as soon as you find other ways to earn money in the city, school is out the door. . . . Tell students that the reason to go to school is to please themselves. Most teachers think that [telling kids about jobs and money] is a motivator, but it is a downplayer. . . . You should get educated for yourself.” The author of the essay explains that “educators’ assumptions about minority students . . . can send a message that we think very little of them as human beings. These kinds of assumptions also fail to take into account the wide range of factors that motivate these students in school” (Fowler-Finn, 2003, p. 23).

### SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS

Students of color and low income face barriers in society and, consequently, in school that contribute to risk of dropping out. As argued in other reports (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Shannon & Bylsma, 2002; and others), contemporary schools generally reflect white, middle-class culture. Students from different cultural and economic backgrounds may feel alienated, unwelcome, or out of place in these schools leading to disengagement and dropping out or attitudes and behaviors that result in the system “pushing” them out. Schools promote the values of the majority culture and not that of the minority child, which may have the effect of forcing children to choose between them (St. Germaine, 1995; Wehalge et al., 1989).

Researchers describe the discontinuity between school and home culture and the impact on dropouts. Stanton-Salazar (1997) discusses sociocultural barriers students face that are “erected when the cultural components in one world (e.g., the home, the ethnic

community) are viewed as less important than in another, or worse yet, when they are denigrated or tacitly cast as inferior” (p. 18). Lockwood and Secada (1999) write that Hispanic youth encounter “stereotypes, personal prejudice and social bias,” often “part of larger anti-immigrant forces in this society,” that affect their experiences in school (p. 2). St. Germaine concludes that “cultural discontinuity is one of the obstacles American Indian and Alaska Native students face in completing high school” (p. 4). Cultural expectations may create barriers for school completion. For example, Romo (1998) discusses the impact of gender expectations on Latinas who may not be encouraged to complete school because they are expected to fulfill traditional cultural roles for women.

Culturally insensitive teachers and classes may unwittingly contribute to disengagement or disillusionment of students of color. Fine (1986) provides a scene from her field notes: a white male teacher in a reading class of Black and Latino tenth and eleventh graders suggested they do a cultural comparison. He stated, “Let’s compare Hispanics to Americans.” Fine makes the point that “contrast in life-styles, experiences, histories, and taken-for-granted expectations is extreme” between predominantly white middle-class teachers and students predominantly Black and Latino (p. 401). Reyhner (1992) asserts, “Academically capable Native students often drop out of school because their needs are not being met while others are pushed out because they protest in a variety of ways how they are treated in school.” He writes that “teaching methods and school curriculum need to be changed to reduce cultural conflict between home and school” (p. 1).

Students who are not proficient in English are potentially more likely to drop out of school. In a report on the Class of 2001 in New York City public schools, current English language learners (ELL) had the highest dropout rates and lowest graduation rates, although former ELL students who had received English as a second language or bilingual services graduated at higher rates than all students including English proficient students. The report contends that the dropout rate for ELLs is getting progressively worse, particularly in view of the accountability requirements (Advocates for Children, 2002).

Rumberger (2001) discusses the influence of communities and peer groups on students’ dropping out. He writes that there is some “empirical evidence that differences in neighborhood characteristics can help explain differences in dropout rates among communities apart from the influence of families. . . .” (p. 17). Although he cites several studies that argue that communities affect dropout, he states that they do not explain how they do so. He speculates, “Poor communities may influence child and adolescent development through the lack of resources (playgrounds and parks, after-school programs) or negative peer influences. Community residence may also influence parenting practices over and above parental education and income. Finally, students living in poor communities may also be more likely to have friends as dropouts, which increases the likelihood of dropping out of school” (p. 17).

In discussing sociocultural factors that help explain differences in dropout among ethnic racial groups, Rumberger (2000) cites research by Steinberg, Dornbusch, and

Brown. Their study concludes that “Asian students are more successful in school because of two cultural beliefs: (1) a belief that not getting a good education will hurt their chances for future success (rather than a belief that a good education will help their chances); and (2) a belief that academic success comes from effort rather than ability or the difficulty of the material. They also find that the contexts of families, schools, and peers influence the achievement of racial and ethnic groups differently” (p. 20).

Researchers have found that sociocultural factors interfere with school success and may increase alienation and disengagement. For example, Ogbu (1989) studied school performance among minority students. He surmises that “involuntary immigrants,” particularly Black Americans, have developed coping mechanisms that are essentially oppositional to the white culture. Although this frame of reference helps develop a sense of identity and self-worth, it does not build trust in schools or encourage school performance because of a fear of acting white. Ogbu writes that involuntary minorities “interpret the school rules and standard practices as an imposition of a white cultural frame of reference which does not necessarily meet their ‘real educational needs’” (p. 196). Such oppositional behavior may create academic and behavioral problems in school that increase the likelihood of dropping out.

The sports subculture in modern society has created another form of dropping out, particularly for Black youth, according to Solomon (1989). He studied the phenomenon of “remaining in school but disengaging from the pursuit of academic credentials” and calls students who do so “in-school” dropouts. He uses several research studies in the United States, Canada, and England to conclude that “dropping out of the academic culture of the school and adopting the alternative sports culture may lead to serious in-school dysfunctional consequences for black youth.” Some studies also found that teachers exacerbated the problem by “channeling black students out of the mainstream curriculum and into sports” (p. 85). Solomon writes that “effective intervention starts with school personnel raising their expectations of black students . . . [and] making the academic curriculum more accessible and attractive to these ‘would-be sportsmen’” (p. 90).

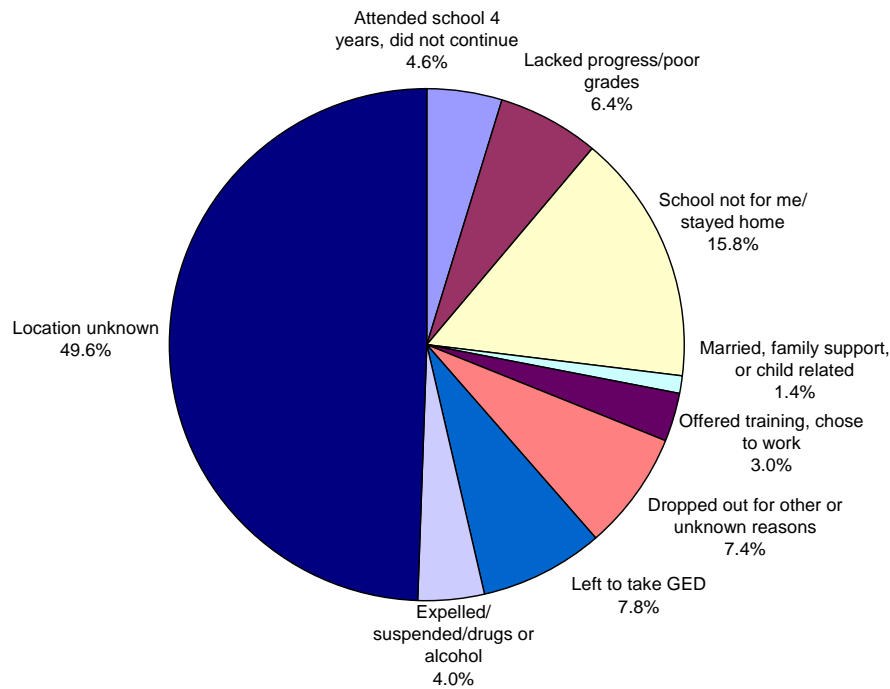
### **REASONS GIVEN IN WASHINGTON FOR DROPPING OUT**

Data on dropouts in Washington supports the complexity of the research findings noted above (see Table 2 and Figure 7). Students in grades 9–12 gave many different reasons why they did not finish their high school education. Nearly half of all dropouts in Grades 9–12 were students who had an unknown location and must be considered dropouts by the federal government (Bylsma & Ireland, 2005). It is not known why these students left school. In some cases, they may have transferred to another school but there have been no request for records to confirm a transfer has taken place.

**Table 2: Reasons Given for Dropping Out, Washington Students in Grades 9–12 Students (School Year 2003-04)**

Grade	Attended school 4 years, did not continue	Lacked progress/poor grades	School not for me/stayed home	Married, family support, or child related	Offered training, chose to work	Dropped out for other or unknown reasons	Left to take GED	Expelled/suspended/drugs or alcohol	Location unknown	Total
All grades	845	1,179	2,899	253	547	1,365	1,441	731	9,105	18,365
<i>Percent of Total</i>	<b>4.6%</b>	<b>6.4%</b>	<b>15.8%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>3.0%</b>	<b>7.4%</b>	<b>7.8%</b>	<b>4.0%</b>	<b>49.6%</b>	
Grade 9	27	270	801	49	72	323	148	240	2,556	4,486
Grade 10	18	278	696	59	122	323	328	218	2,519	4,561
Grade 11	121	304	788	65	192	383	575	178	2,381	4,987
Grade 12	679	327	614	80	161	336	390	95	1,649	4,331

**Figure 7: Reasons Why Washington Students Left Before Graduating, Grades 9-12 (School Year 2003–04)**



Source: *Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington’s Counties, Districts, and Schools, School Year 2003-04*, Bylsma & Ireland.

## CHAPTER 4

# EDUCATION-RELATED FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DROPOUTS

Educational institutions themselves contribute significantly to the dropout problem. Researchers acknowledge that a combination of student, family, community, and school factors work together to perpetuate the problem, but considerable recent research has explored education-related factors associated with dropping out. Rather than focusing on the individual attributes of dropouts, which essentially blamed the victim, recent studies have considered how schools themselves engage in practices or create conditions that push some students out of school, especially those who exhibit the social and academic characteristics described in the previous chapter (Lee & Burkam, 2000).

This chapter discusses the school policies and practices that contribute to the dropout problem. It begins with some general descriptions of the various institutional factors that contribute to the dropout problem, then provides more details in four categories: (1) school policies and procedures, (2) school structure and class assignment, (3) course content and instructional practices, and (4) school climate and relationships.

### **OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION-RELATED FACTORS**

Various researchers have noted that the educational system and schools themselves contribute to students' dropping out. Cuban contends that the "inflexible structure of the school itself . . . contributes to the conditions that breed academic failure and unsatisfactory student performance" (cited in West, 1991, p. 2). Rumberger (2001) states that individual attitudes and behaviors are shaped by the institutional settings where people live. Fine (1991) refers to practices that exclude students as "institutional rituals."

Schools are uncomfortable and unnatural places for some students. Research studies characterize contemporary American high schools, for example, as bureaucratic, fragmented, and impersonal institutions that fail to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) write, "For many students, schooling signifies institutional hypocrisy and aimlessness, rather than consistency and clarity of purpose; arbitrariness and inequity, rather than fairness; ridicule and humiliation, rather than personal support and respect; and worst of all, failure, rather than success. For others, the disaffection can seem less personally damaging—school is seen as a theatre of meaningless ritual, unrelated to students' serious concerns" (p. 19).

According to Hixson (1993), "students are placed 'at risk' when they experience a significant mismatch between their circumstances and needs, and the capacity or willingness of the school to accept, accommodate, and respond to them in a manner that

supports and enables their maximum social, emotional, and intellectual growth and development. As the degree of mismatch increases, so does the likelihood that they will fail to either complete their elementary and secondary education, or more importantly, to benefit from it in a manner that ensures they have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to be successful at the next stage of their lives . . . The focus of our efforts, therefore, should be on enhancing our institutional and professional capacity and responsiveness, rather than categorizing and penalizing students for simply being who they are” (p. 1).

The National Dropout Prevention Center lists some school-related factors associated with dropping out. These are

- “Conflict between home/school culture
- Ineffective discipline system
- Lack of adequate counseling
- Negative school climate
- Lack of relevant curriculum
- Passive instructional strategies
- Inappropriate use of technology
- Disregard of student learning styles
- Retentions/suspensions
- Low expectations
- Lack of language instruction” (Wells, 1990 cited in NDPC Quick Facts).

Some factors associated with higher student dropout rates appear particularly important for students of color. For example, several authors note characteristics of schools that negatively impact Native American students: Large schools, uncaring and untrained teachers and counselors, passive teaching methods, inappropriate curriculum, inappropriate testing and student retention, tracked classes, and lack of parental involvement (Reyhner, 1992; St. Germaine, 1995). Gay (2000) cites studies that demonstrate effective versus ineffective instruction for Black students. According to these studies, “many African American students prefer learning situations that are active, participatory, emotionally engaging, and filled with visual and physical stimulation” (p. 169). Padron, Waxman, and Rivera (2002) discuss the factors associated with underachievement of Hispanic students, including the lack of qualified teachers, inappropriate teaching practices (emphasizing lecture, drill and practice, remediation, and seatwork using worksheets), and at-risk school environments (poorly maintained buildings, unqualified teachers). They argue that the school rather than the individual student should be considered at risk. Accordingly, at risk-school environments are marked by characteristics such as the following:

- “Alienation of students and teachers
- Inferior standards and low quality of education
- Low expectations of students
- High noncompletion rates for students
- Classroom practices that are unresponsive to students’ learning needs
- High truancy and disciplinary problems
- Inadequate preparation of students for the future” (p. 11).

## **SCHOOL POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**

Bureaucratic regulations and overt actions taken by school officials can actually eliminate students from school enrollment. Some terms that are used to describe these actions include “easing out” (Farrell, 1990), “forced out” (Schargel & Smink, 2001), “pushed out” and “discharging” (Fine, 1991). Fine calls these rules “policies that purge” (p. 81). Several studies demonstrate how schools contribute to students’ involuntary withdrawal from school by “systematically excluding and discharging ‘troublemakers’ and other problematic students. . . .” (Rumberger, 2001, p. 17). Policies related to student behavior and truancy often carry punishments such as suspensions or expulsions that may ultimately lead to students’ quitting school. Other administrative procedures in which school officials exert control over dropout decisions include “age cut-offs, grade point average minimums and attendance regulations” (DeLuca & Rosenbaum, 2000, p. 1). Policies and procedures related to discipline, attendance, grading, standards, high stakes assessments, and retention that impact dropout are discussed in this section.

### **Discipline and Attendance**

“No tolerance” policies related to student behavior and violence may be enacted with good intention. However, studies demonstrate that these policies negatively impact some students, particularly students of color and poverty, to a greater degree than other students. Suspensions and expulsions, as punishment for poor attendance, truancy, or discipline, effectively “pushout” some students who are overtly discharged or, more subtly, not encouraged to stay in school (Fine, 1991; Osher et al., 2001; and others). Fine’s study of a large urban high school found that discharge was a “majority experience.” Students, including those who were at grade level in reading and math, dropped out after suspensions, absences, or being retained in ninth grade. Dropouts frequently criticize discipline programs as “unfair and arbitrary” and call for fair and respectful treatment in school (Alexander et al., 2001). Data regarding disciplinary actions confirm disproportionate application of rules and regulations (Civil Rights Project, 2000).

Actively discharging students pushes students out the door. More subtle messages may be given students that encourage their dropping out. Some students express the conviction that they were not welcome at the school. Farrell (1990) writes, “There are a number of educators who believe that their major responsibility is to teach those who want to learn. Their classrooms, they think, would be better off if unwilling students left. Easing a student out of school, to them, might be the best thing possible for everybody” (p. 95). Administrators also have described suspension and expulsion as ridding the school of difficult students to keep from contaminating others or to keep the school safe for the majority. One dean quoted by Fine in *Framing Dropouts* (1991) used the analogy of protecting passengers from “highjackers” (p. 156).

The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University has studied the effects of Zero Tolerance and school discipline on students. The project reports that “over-zealous approaches to promoting safety” have resulted in 3.1 million children in America

suspended in 1998 and another 87,000 expelled (p. v). The report concludes that “more than 30% of sophomores who drop out have been suspended and that high school dropouts are more likely to be incarcerated” (p. vii). A disproportionate number of the students suspended are students of color. Data from Seattle School District also provide some evidence that certain students are more likely than others to be pushed out (Dean, 2002).

In some instances, suspensions for poor attendance, truancy, and tardiness exacerbate withdrawal behavior and help convince students that they do not belong in school. The more school missed, voluntarily or involuntarily, the less learning takes place, the farther behind a student becomes, and the greater the likelihood of leaving school. School district policies may impose semester suspensions for excessive absences with a result of failing grades or loss of credits. Some policies may link attendance with grades so students may not be permitted to make up work missed due to unexcused absences. Washington’s law (RCW 28A.600.030) permits this practice.

### Grading, Standards, and Assessments

High standards, grading practices, and “get tough” policies to end social promotion may also contribute to student dropout. Wehlage et al. (1989) point out the still widespread belief, particularly in secondary schools, that some students must fail in order to maintain academic standards for the rest. Such beliefs create winners and losers; those who consistently “lose” may give up and leave school. The long-standing practice of “grading on a curve” perpetuates the assumption that some must fail. The accumulation of failing marks results in failing courses or an entire grade. And, as has been demonstrated by several studies, failing increases the likelihood of dropping out.

Several authors have raised concerns about the potential impact of the current high stakes testing and high standards movement on school graduation and dropout rates. Although research has not established a causal relationship between high stakes testing required for graduation and dropouts, some studies suggest that states that have the most severe consequences attached to testing have more dropouts than do states that have low or moderate consequences attached to testing. Amrein and Berliner (2002) conclude that high school exit exams contributed to higher dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and more students seeking the GED in the majority of states that implemented graduation examinations. Warren and Edwards (2003), using data from the early 1990s, found that students were about 70 percent more likely to obtain a GED than a regular high school diploma when they were required to pass exit exams (cited in the Center on Education Policy panelist’s summary).

Haney (2003) examines how graduation rates in several states have changed over time. Although he presents different methods of calculating graduation rates and argues their relative merits, he concludes that graduation rates have declined in the years from 1987–88 to 1998–99, regardless of methods used. He writes, “When annual graduation rates are calculated as the number of graduates divided by the numbers of students in grade 9 three years earlier, there is a clear trend for high stakes testing states to show larger declines in graduation rates than relatively low stakes testing states.” He



concludes, “Among the twelve large states for which data have been reported here [in the study], the lower stakes testing states showed average declines in graduation rates of -2.5% between 1987–88 and 1998–99 while the high stakes testing states showed average declines of almost -8%” (p. 26).

The Advocates for Children of New York report concludes that the requirements for regents' examinations have impacted dropout rates for English Language Learners. The authors assert that ELL students have not been given the necessary support promised in the state's action plan (2002). In interviews, students reflect disenchantment and alienation from school that along with negative experiences at school finally led to dropping out.

Other studies have found no evidence that exit exams impact dropout (Carnoy & Loeb, forthcoming, Davenport et al., 2002, cited by Center on Education Policy panelist's summary). According to the panelists, convened in March 2003, “. . . there is no consistent evidence that exit exams are directly causing certain groups of students to drop out from school at increased rates” (p. 3). However, they conclude that from the current research, “there is no evidence of exit exams decreasing dropout rates. That is, exit exams are not helping to keep students in school” (p. 4).

Rabinowitz, Zimmerman, and Sherman (2001) place high-stakes tests and dropping out in the context of standards-based reform. They suggest that “the likelihood of students quitting school may depend less on the use of high-stakes tests than on state accountability policies, school/district organization and structure, and how those play out in the implementation of the [high stakes] tests” (p. 8).

### Retention

According to many studies, retention in grade is highly correlated with dropping out of school. Students who are not promoted are more likely to dropout once they reach secondary schools (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Neild et al., 2001; Roderick, 1994; Shepard & Smith, 1990). According to Alexander et al. “retentions at every stage of schooling prior to high school are associated with elevated dropout risk” (p. 799). Even retention in the primary grades increases chances for dropping out. These researchers also point out that “these effects are additive implying that multiple retentions increase the hazard of dropout over the hazard associated with a single retention” (p. 800). For example, in the Beginning School Study in Baltimore, 35 percent of students who repeated grades were retained two or more times. And “80% of multiple repeaters [in the study] leave school without degrees, including 94% of those held back in both elementary school and the middle grades” (p. 800). A study of ninth graders in Philadelphia schools confirms the impact of retention on dropout. Of the students that dropped out by the end of four years in high school, 66 percent had been retained in the ninth grade. Conversely, 6 percent of those graduating had repeated ninth grade (Neild et al.).

## **SCHOOL STRUCTURE AND CLASS ASSIGNMENT**

School practices, even some ostensibly designed to serve students, can influence dropouts. School organization and size, transitions between schools or grade levels, assignment to special education or remediation classes or programs, tracking by ability level, and rigid age-grade placement practices may potentially contribute to students' dropping out. These are discussed in this section.

### **School Size and Organization**

School size and organizational structures are associated with students' dropping out of school according to some studies. Large impersonal high schools are thought to exacerbate conditions that lead to students' leaving school. Newmann (1989) writes, "The larger the school, the more difficult it is to achieve clear, consensual goals, to promote student participation in school management, and to create positive personal relations among students and staff"—issues that he concludes are relevant to reducing student alienation (p. 160). Creating and maintaining positive conditions for holding students, therefore, may be accomplished more successfully in smaller schools.

Some researchers conclude that students are more likely to drop out of larger high schools and least likely to drop out of medium-sized schools. Lee and Burkan (2000) studied school organization, including size, academics, and social organization using data from the High School Effectiveness Supplement and National Educational Longitudinal Study. They write that school size, per se, is unlikely to directly influence the probability that students will drop out of high school. However, their results show that school size is quite important and that students in medium-size schools (600–900) are least likely to drop out. According to these researchers, the most important finding is that "students are less likely to drop out of high schools where the average relationships between teachers and students (as perceived by the students) are more positive." They emphasize the importance of adult behaviors. "Although schools themselves have little ability to influence who attends them, we believe that the adults who work in schools (teachers and administrators) have the ability to consciously alter how they interact with their students. Quite clearly, students stay in school when social relations with their teachers are positive. This association persists even when students' background, school demographics, and school sector are accounted for." However, positive relationships in large and very large schools (enrolling over 1500 students) "no longer hold students in school" (p. 26).

### **Transitions**

Transitions from small elementary schools to middle schools and from middle schools into high schools are problematic for many students. Students who have had minimal or no problems in school may experience dramatic changes in attendance and performance when making the transition between schools (Roderick, 1994). Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg (2001) argue that "common turning points" in students' school careers can "jumpstart the process of disengaging from school and greatly increase the probability of dropping out. The timing and patterning of these critical events among urban

students, particularly those attending large, nonselective neighborhood high schools, further suggest that what schools do—or don't do—to help their students make the critical transition to high school may play a central role in the process of dropping out" (p. 7).

In a study of Philadelphia schools during the 1999–2000 school year, Neild et al. found that many first-time ninth graders had many more absences and course failures than they had in their eighth-grade year. Although some students had academic problems in elementary and middle school years, their earlier problems were nowhere near the crisis of the ninth grade. The "data highlight the difficulty students have in negotiating ninth grade successfully" and show that dropping out is linked to ninth grade performance. Of the students that dropped out by the end of four years, 66 percent were not promoted their first year in ninth grade (p. 20). This study found that "the experience of the ninth grade year contributes substantially to the probability of dropping out, despite controls for demographic and family background characteristics, previous school performance, and pre-high school attitudes and ambitions" (p. 30). The researchers write, "For every percent increase in courses failed in ninth grade, the odds of dropping out within four years increase by 2.4 percent . . ." (p. 25). They also emphasize the impact of over-age on students entering high school. "Each year older a student is upon entering high school increases the odds of dropping out by 109 percent" (p. 26).

Lan and Lanthier (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of dropouts using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) to investigate change in students' personal characteristics from 8<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. They also found that transitions, particularly into high school, present a critical juncture in the experience of students. They observed "that dropout students' perceptions of school, teachers, and school-related work deteriorated between the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and continued to decline after the 10<sup>th</sup> grade until they dropped out" (p. 325).

### Class and Program Assignment

Program placement and quality of services may also be linked to dropping out. Students frequently are placed in special programs or "tracked" according to identified conditions or ability levels. These placements are intended to increase the appropriateness of instruction. Assignment to special education and remedial programs, however, may actually have a negative impact on some students as expectations are lowered, instruction is fragmented and slowly-paced, and class work is quite passive. Students also may feel stigmatized. A report on special education dropouts claims that the dropout rate among students "receiving special education services significantly exceeds the dropout rate among the general school-age population" (Lichtenstein & Zantal-Wiener, 1988, p. 1). Another report suggests "the dropout rate in special education is double that of general education" (cited by Kortering & Braziel, 1999, p. 1). Students with learning disabilities have an estimated dropout rate ranging from 17–42 percent; students with emotional or behavioral disabilities have similar rates (21–42%), according to studies cited by Scanlon & Mellard (2002). Students may "age-out" and leave school without completing programs. Other writers suggest that some students who leave school early may have needed special services but did not receive them.

Research on the relationship of special education assignment and dropout is limited. However, findings from other studies infer a connection. *Racial Inequity in Special Education*, published by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University in 2002, emphasizes the disproportionality of Black and Native American students who are referred to special education programs. The conclusions drawn about higher rates of school disciplinary action for minority students with disabilities may apply to the dropout discussion. The study reports that in most states Black children are identified at one and a half to four times the rate of white children in the disability categories of mental retardation and emotional disturbance. These circumstances may contribute to the numbers of special education students' leaving school or being "pushed out" of school.

Lack of appropriate services may also affect students who drop out. Harrell (1999) studied adults who dropped out of school and re-entered an adult high school program and noted that several of the students had learning difficulties that had not been addressed during their public school years. The Civil Rights Project found that Latino and Asian American children are under-identified for services in special education.

Stereotyping students of color and poverty is another issue related to class assignment and tracking. Such stereotyping impacts their opportunities and choices (Conchas, 2001; Immerwahr, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Romo, 1998). These students may be over-represented in general or vocational track courses or remedial classes and under-enrolled in advanced courses or enrichment programs. Romo described the experiences of Latinas in Texas. The young women face stereotyping regarding their course opportunities, access, and encouragement. Romo reported that "Latina high school students are frequently enrolled in cosmetology classes or tracked into noncollege preparatory general education programs. Few vocation programs encourage Latinas to enter nontraditional fields or offer them reasons to remain in school" (p. 2).

In a study looking at the variability of school engagement of Mexican American students, Conchas noted the differences in opportunity and support Latino students may experience in different programs within the same schools. Many Latino students in general programs did not experience the "social scaffolding" available in other programs, particularly advanced high level courses. Although they had aspirations for the future, these students did not feel they had access to good programs and teachers or the support they needed. The author states that these students were "relegated to a position of invisibility within the larger high school setting" (p. 10-11).

### **COURSE CONTENT AND INSTRUCTION**

Classroom routines, expectations, and schoolwork also contribute to students' engagement or disengagement with school. Students at risk of dropping out, who also are often students of color and poverty, are frequently subjected to low-level, repetitive, passive, and unengaging class work (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Haycock, 1998; Oakes, 1985; St. Germaine, 1995). Students frequently describe classes and school as boring; and some authors have concluded boredom is a first step in

withdrawing from school. Quality and depth of curriculum content are also associated with student engagement and holding students in school.

### Boredom

Many students report that they are bored by their classes. These students may “tune out” during school and ultimately drop out. “Boredom is actually the first absencing behavior; it is a way of internally dropping out. Furthermore, boredom gives some justification for the more active absencing behaviors that follow” (Farrell, 1990, p. 112). Farrell argues, “Boredom, then, is not simply a lack of interest in the content of school courses. It results from certain schooling processes, such as judgmental teachers and lack of success. What makes it so pervasive is that it is constantly constructed and reconstructed in the dialogues that students have with each other. . . . What we have to do then is make education less judgmental and find ways for students to complete valued projects. . . . If boredom can be socially constructed, so can vitality. A vital school is one where teachers and students work together with a belief that what they accomplish is important” (p. 113-114).

According to LeCompte and Dworkin (1991), “When at-risk students say that school is boring, they mean that regardless of their status—be they low achievers or gifted—they are treated as if they uniformly have IQs of 4” (p. 68). Often, when students are labeled, a set of practices are implemented that may actually exacerbate the problems, even when designed to help. Pull-out programs, fragmented curriculum, low-level expectations, unchallenging busywork, and excessive repetition are examples of ineffective practices described by these authors and others. Boredom is also an issue with Hispanic and Native American students reported by Lockwood and Secada (1999) and Reyhner (1992).

### Curriculum Quality

Superficial and poor quality curriculum impacts students at risk of dropping out, according to some authors. Because of the “obsession with coverage,” American school curriculum has been described as a mile wide and an inch deep. “Classrooms become places where material must be learned even though it may seem nonsensical to students (because there is not time to explain), where students are denied the opportunities to explore related topics they may be curious about (because their interests may wander too far from the official topics to be covered), where teachers’ talents for teaching subtle nuances and complexities are squelched. As a result, many students stop asking questions soon after early elementary grades; they passively allow teachers and texts to pour material into their heads to be stored for future reproduction. . . .” (Newmann in Whelage et al., 1989, p. 185). Curriculum that is focused and allows deeper treatment of selected topics is an alternative that holds promise for all students in traditional classrooms as well as alternative schools. Newmann and his associates developed a framework called “authentic pedagogy,” a concept described in the next chapter. In their study, student achievement increased in classes characterized by authentic pedagogy.

In their study on school organization and dropping out, Lee and Burkam (2001) also suggest that more challenging curriculum are a means for keeping students in school. They use the term “constrained curriculum” to describe a curriculum that is focused on academics. They write, “A growing body of research demonstrates that students learn more, and learning is distributed more equitably, in schools with a constrained curriculum, consisting largely of academic courses and with few low-level courses. In schools with such a ‘constrained curriculum,’ students typically are required to complete many of these courses to graduate” (p. 8). These researchers conclude that “the structure of the high school curriculum is associated with holding students in high school until graduation. Regardless of students’ own academic background and school performance, schools with . . . ‘a constrained academic curriculum’—more challenging courses, fewer remedial or non-academic courses—hold students in school” (p. 24).

Education Trust, among other entities, urges a more rigorous college-preparatory curriculum for all students. In *Thinking K–16*, Barth (2003) describes the differences in expectations, content, and skills among courses in college preparatory, vocational or general tracks in high school. High school graduation requirements often fall short of what is needed for students to be ready for college. Students of color and poverty are often the ones who do not have access to rigorous, elective programs. Citing initiatives in San Jose, Houston, and El Paso, Barth describes school districts that are reconciling graduation requirements for all students with college readiness requirements. Barth indicates that students of color who are held to the new policies are performing better on tests and that graduation rates have held. In other words, students apparently have met the challenge and stayed in school at about the same rate as prior to the new requirements. (The accuracy of Houston’s dropout rates has been questioned, however.) The report concludes that students should be prepared for both work and college through opportunities to take appropriate coursework. It also emphasizes that sufficient time and ample support must be provided for students to succeed in a rigorous curriculum, and students must be taught by knowledgeable, well-trained teachers who have the resources to do the job.

### **SCHOOL CLIMATE AND RELATIONSHIPS**

A dimension of school that has significant impact on students and their experiences in schools has been called school ethos, school climate, or school learning environment. Fundamental to a healthy, positive school climate are the relationships among adults and students and the degree to which students feel they “belong.” In their work on student engagement, Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) ask the question, “What institutional conditions are necessary to get students to buy into the general enterprise of trying to succeed in school?” Their answer is “school membership” (p. 19). These researchers defined school membership as the connections that students develop with the institution. A sense of belonging increases in schools that “demonstrate clarity of purpose, equity and personal support, provide frequent occasions for all students to experience educational success, and integrate all of these features into a climate of caring” (Wehlage et al., p. 120-121). A number of studies stress the importance of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of teachers and other school people toward their students.

Interviews with student dropouts reflect their perception that schools are often alien places in which teachers do not care about them or try to help them learn. Gallagher (2002) summarizes a group of student interviews. “None of the informants described high school as a hospitable setting; none felt welcome at school or believed that they would be missed.” One student believed “he had been subtly encouraged to leave, whereas (others) claimed they were pushed out” (p. 45). Harrell (1999) reports responses from adults who returned to adult high school to complete requirements for a diploma after having dropped out. A common theme expressed in this set of interviews was “one of the early negative memories and painful experiences in school . . . stories of alienation and of enduring an ordeal of constantly feeling like they didn’t belong and didn’t measure up academically. What clearly weaves through all their stories is a feeling that they needed more attention, more time, and more understanding of their particular learning difficulties” (p. 96).

Alienation theory has been used to explain students’ disengagement with school (Fine, 1989; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1990; Newmann, 1981). “Alienation theory tends to focus on the absence of positive ties between students and teachers in explaining student outcomes” (Croninger & Lee, 2001, p. 554). “Dropouts frequently complain that their teachers do not care about them, are not interested in how well they do in school, and are unwilling to help with problems. . . . In exit interviews, roughly half of all dropouts say that they left school because they were failing or just didn’t like being at school, whereas one-third say they quit because they didn’t get along with their teachers or other students . . . . By their own accounts, many dropouts have fewer positive social interactions and less access to assistance from teachers than their more successful peers” (p. 551).

### Positive Relationships

Adults in schools are responsible for creating positive relationships and for actively teaching all students. In the past, schools were assumed to be working well because large numbers of students graduated. However, the true test for educators is to teach all students to high standards, particularly those who face the most obstacles. Unfortunately, “(s)tudent testimony suggests . . . that some schools consider it their task to determine who can successfully complete difficult work with minimal help. This approach creates winners and losers, performs a sorting function for society, and fosters or exacerbates a difficult issue for some students, contributing in a major way to their at-risk status” (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 124). Teaching all students well requires a positive school environment with healthy student and adult relationships.

Relationships among students and teachers provide social networks that can support students and help stem dropping out. In a study of student dropouts, Farrell (1990) emphasizes the importance of relationships among students and adults in a school. He asserts that “the lack of ability to form social networks might, in the end, be a more crucial determinant of low achievement, both economic and education, than the lack of ability to read and write” (p. 75). Although other adults in a school may provide support for students, and peers can provide some forms of assistance, the relationships with teachers as a source of social capital are especially important.

Referring to social capital, Croninger and Lee (2001) note that “differences in the probability of dropping out can be explained by differences in the quality of the social networks that comprise a student’s interactions with teachers” (p. 554). Such networks can provide students with valuable resources including emotional support, role models, knowledge and skills, guidance, or help in accomplishing school tasks (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 9). Croninger and Lee distinguish between two forms of social capital, student-teacher talks and student-teacher relations. Student-teacher talk refers to informal conversation on personal and school matters that occurs outside class. Student-teacher relations refer to trust. For students academically and socially at-risk, benefits were almost exclusively linked to student-teacher talks. The study concludes that when students “trust their teachers and informally received guidance from teachers, they are more likely to persist through graduation” (p. 565). The researchers note that all students benefit from teacher-based forms of social capital, but “those who benefit *most* are students most at risk of dropping out of high school” (p. 565).

### Negative Interactions

Although teachers are an important source of social capital for students, teachers can also actively thwart student success. Teachers who disparage students may increase the chances they leave school early. DeLuca and Rosenbaum (2000) consider “the role of social isolation and teacher disparagement not only with regard to their effects on students’ experience of threats, but also independently on withdrawal behaviors and eventual dropout . . . .” (p. 2). Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, they examined the extent students feel isolated, threatened, or disparaged by teachers. They summarize that “twenty percent of the students report that they feel put down by other students in class. And almost that many (16.5%) report feeling they experienced teacher disparagement” (p. 4).

DeLuca and Rosebaum write that “social isolation is most common among low SES, male, black and Latino, low track, and low-test students . . . [and] withdrawal is most common among male, Latino, low track, and low test students” (p. 5). They also find “that disparaged students are significantly more likely to drop out, and this is even true after controlling for test scores, other background variables, and social isolation. Apparently, not only are threats and withdrawal behaviors affected by social isolation and teacher put-down, but ultimately so is dropout” (p. 6). These researchers confirm the importance of positive social interactions in offsetting some of the influence of poor academic achievement on students’ withdrawing and dropping out.

\* \* \* \* \*

In this and the preceding chapter, research and professional reports have provided insight into the complexities and multiple causes of dropping out from both individual and institutional perspectives. Student engagement and school membership are essential for keeping students in school and ensuring they learn successfully. The next two chapters examine strategies and programs that show promise for holding students in school and decreasing dropout rates.



## CHAPTER 5

# RESTRUCTURING SCHOOLS AS A DROPOUT PREVENTION STRATEGY

Dropout prevention and dropout recovery programs have been developed and implemented with varying degrees of success over the past forty years. The research suggests that reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates require comprehensive, concerted efforts that include systemic planning and the willingness to change existing schools and create new programs and approaches to education. No single program or practice has been discovered to significantly reduce dropout rates. “There is no magical, quick fix solution to the dropout problem. The problem is complex and requires a complex array of solutions. Dropouts have dissimilar characteristics and therefore need different kinds of programs which respond to their individual circumstances and needs” (Woods, 1995, p. 13).

Although researchers suggest certain risk factors for predicting dropout, using these factors to identify individual students as likely dropouts is problematic. Schargel and Smink (2001) emphasize that the “majority of dropouts are white, not poor, not pregnant, and not from single-parent homes” (p. 24). According to the *National Educational Longitudinal Studies of 1988: A Profile*, “over half (53%) of the students who dropped out had none of the risk factors, 27% had one, and 20% had two or more” (cited in Schargel & Smink, p. 24). Even if dropouts are accurately identified, knowing with any precision what interventions they may need is difficult. Therefore, the most promising overall strategy for reducing dropouts is restructuring schools to meet the needs of all students. Farrell (1990) writes, “If the place called school is not good for a particular child, we either have to change the place or change the child” (p. 93). Schargel and Smink advocate building “dropout prevention into all existing and newly created programs” (p. 10-11). Other authors agree—Deschenes et al. (2001) state “educators need to focus on better adapting the school to the child as the most feasible way to remedy the mismatch in public education and to prevent much of the labeling and stratification in the standards movement that has worked to the detriment of students in previous eras” (p. 5).

Increasing student success at all levels is a broad dropout prevention strategy. According to Alexander et al. (2001), “the measure of our dealing adequately with the needs of at-risk youth should not, probably, be numbers of dropouts, but should instead be the kinds of instruction and amounts of learning that take place in the school” (p. 4). Fashola and Slavin (1997) emphasize that providing students with high quality elementary and middle school experiences will help eliminate “key precursors to dropout” including “low achievement, retention in grade, and dislike of school. . .” They also stress that “increasing the quality and attractiveness of the secondary curriculum is another obvious approach to dropout prevention” (p. 3).

Productive classroom climates are needed to increase students' commitment to and involvement in school. According to a guide for preventing student dropout, positive classrooms reflect characteristics such as:

- “A positive atmosphere and supportive peer culture
- A discipline system that is both fair and effective
- Person-oriented rather than rule-oriented classes
- Decision-making opportunities for students
- Opportunities to develop self-esteem and self-confidence
- Instruction and opportunities to help students develop a commitment to social and life values
- Opportunities to orient students to the broader world outside school, showing the correlation between education and work
- Opportunities for students to become aware of their potential as workers
- Parents and community volunteers as mentors
- Minimal structure and high flexibility
- Individualized and small-group instructional materials and practices
- Instructional methods that involve tactile, kinesthetic, and auditory perceptions
- Peer teaching and cooperative learning techniques
- Instructional activities that build group cohesiveness
- Promotion of cooperative behavior among students
- Basic skills development, integrating the use of basic and vocational skills
- Time on task for repeated practice” (in West, 1991, p. 17).

This chapter explores restructuring as a strategy with high potential for preventing dropouts. The restructuring strategies are organized around three themes: (1) comprehensive school improvement, (2) increasing students' sense of belonging in schools, frequently called “school membership,” and (3) increasing student engagement through meaningful curriculum and effective instruction. Chapter 6 describes prevention and recovery programs targeted for dropouts or potential dropouts. Implementation of any strategy described in either chapter requires considerable professional development. The strategies generally require different ways of viewing students who are at risk of dropping out and the application of a wider and deeper repertoire of instructional methods and organizational solutions.

### **COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

Numerous research and professional reports suggest comprehensive strategies to improve student learning. Alienation from school, too often reinforced by teachers and administrators, is the most important threat to keeping at-risk students in school (Alexander et al., 2001; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1989; Wehlage, 1983). Increasing students' connectedness with schools, therefore, is fundamental to reducing the dropout rate (Woods, 1995). The implementation of the strategies explained below will help improve student learning and increase the “holding power” of schools.

### Characteristics of High Performing Schools

Strategies and processes from the school improvement literature are pertinent to reducing the number of dropouts. Schools that serve students well are those that provide for both the social and academic needs of all students. These schools are characterized by congruence between students' needs and school characteristics, marked by mutually respectful faculty and student interactions both inside and outside the classroom, and staffed by teachers who are "warm demanders" (Kleinfeld, in Gay, 2000) who persist in ensuring students learn. These high performing schools reflect personal attention and support for students in concert with high expectations for academic standards.

**High Performing Schools** The various characteristics of high performing schools have been documented by Shannon and Bylsma (2003) for use in Washington State. Although the number and labels may vary in the research literature, there is a growing consensus that these characteristics are found in schools that are improving student learning and often doing so in the face of considerable challenges. In brief, OSPI has identified nine characteristics: (1) clear and shared focus, (2) high standards and expectations for all students, (3) effective school leadership, (4) high levels of collaboration and communication, (5) curriculum, instruction and assessments aligned with state standards, (6) frequent monitoring of learning and teaching, (7) focused professional development, (8) supportive learning environment, and (9) high level of family and community involvement.

The early research on effective schools compiled characteristics of schools that were succeeding with poor and minority children. These "correlates" of effective schools include clear school mission, high expectations for success, instructional leadership, frequent monitoring of student progress, opportunity to learn and student time on task, safe and orderly environment, and home-school relations (Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte, 1991). These correlates continue to surface in the restructuring literature.

A study of high-performing schools serving Mexican American students reflect many of the characteristics found in other reports on effective schools. However, differences are evident in the way schools implement the elements. For example, these schools focus on cultural values, establish personal contact with families, develop student-centered classrooms, and implement an "advocacy-oriented approach to assessment that held educators accountable for their instructional strategies and for the impact they had on Mexican American learners" (Scribner & Scribner, 2001, p. 1; also, Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999). These researchers also point to a difference in perspective on parent involvement. The Mexican American parents tend to value involvement when they see their activities enhancing the school environment for their students; teachers generally see parent involvement as a means for improving student achievement.

**Restructuring in Secondary Schools** Improving secondary schools through restructuring has potential for significant impact on the experiences of students that inevitably influence dropping out. Two resources are particularly pertinent in helping schools increase their holding power: *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in*

*the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) applies to middle schools and *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* (Maeroff, 1996) applies to high schools.

*Turning Points* first appeared ten years ago as a framework for improving middle level education. An updated and expanded report provides a more in-depth examination of issues regarding middle schools and builds on the recent research. The report describes studies conducted in selected middle schools in Illinois, Massachusetts, and Michigan. These studies find that implementing the components of the “middle school concept” creates more positive environments for students and in some instances improves student achievement. However, the report emphasizes that a great deal more must be done to improve teaching and learning. Thus, the 2000 book reflects a strong emphasis on instruction, curriculum, and assessment. With the goal of ensuring student success, the authors make the following recommendations:

- “Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based on how students learn best.
- Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher standards and become lifelong learners.
- Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities.
- Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.
- Govern democratically, through direct or representative participation by all school staff.
- Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens.
- Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development” (p. 23-24).

*Breaking Ranks* develops six themes for restructuring high schools: personalization, coherency, time, technology, professional development, and leadership. Within these themes, the report calls for schools to change the traditional high school structure and operations. To increase personalization, the report calls for schools to make changes such as organizing into small units, using instructional strategies that accommodate individuals, and assigning a “Personal Adult Advocate” to every student. To achieve coherence, schools must align curriculum and instruction and link subjects more closely so students can understand and apply what they learn. Regarding time, the report urges abandoning the Carnegie unit of seat time and suggests more flexibility, a longer school year, and smaller teacher-student ratios. The report recommends that schools be well equipped with technology that is integral to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. For professional development, schools should promote professional growth for educators and support staff as communities of learning. In regard to leadership, the report confirms the importance of the principal but also suggests that all stakeholders have contributions to make in improving schools, including assuming leadership roles. Other recommendations are made regarding sufficiency of resources, partnerships within the broader community, and involvement of students. Secondary schools that

implement the themes and recommendations in the two reports mentioned here will undoubtedly make inroads in the numbers of students who leave school without graduating.

**Reform Models** School reform models also reflect many of the characteristics of effective schools described in the studies noted above. Although not all models address dropout issues explicitly, they do advocate for changing learning environments, curriculum and instruction, and personal relationships in order to improve student performance. Two models, cited in dropout literature, are included here as examples.

McPartland and Jordan (2001) describe the Talent Development High School as a reform model that illustrates change processes. The authors summarize the essential components of high school dropout prevention programs: (1) structural, organizational, governance changes to “establish the school norms and interpersonal relations” for learning; (2) “curriculum and instructional innovations to give individual students the necessary time and help . . .”, and (3) teacher support systems (p.1).

Coalition of Essential Schools, another reform model, reports improved student performance in some schools. Using data from surveys conducted in 2001 of 41 member schools, the Coalition reports that more minority students are attending college after graduating and more students are taking rigorous coursework than reflected in the national averages. Although individual Coalition schools may be unique, they strive to implement these common principles:

- “Learning to use one's mind well
- Less is more, depth over coverage
- Goals apply to all students
- Personalization
- Student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach
- Demonstration of mastery
- A tone of decency and trust
- Commitment to the entire school
- Resources dedicated to teaching and learning
- Democracy and equity.”<sup>6</sup>

Washington state examples of comprehensive school reform models and strategies that have potential for reducing dropout rates are described in two recent OSPI reports (Shannon & Bylsma, 2005, 2006).

### Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gap

The strategies identified in the report *Addressing the Achievement Gap: A Challenge for Washington Educators* (Shannon & Bylsma, 2002) also apply to reducing the dropout rate. The five strategies, synthesized from the research and professional literature, are (1) changed beliefs and attitudes, (2) culturally responsive teaching, (3)

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<sup>6</sup> For more details, see the Web site  
[http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces\\_docs/about/phil/10cps/10cps.html](http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/about/phil/10cps/10cps.html).

more effective teaching, (4) greater opportunities to learn, and (5) increased family and community involvement. Within each broad strategy are specific practices that improve student learning, student belonging and involvement in school, and levels of support. Students who drop out of school, or who are at-risk of dropping out, benefit from teachers who believe they can succeed, care about them, hold high expectations, and persist in teaching them.<sup>7</sup>

The research and professional literature on dropouts confirms the importance of these strategies. Authors of reports on Hispanic students and dropouts emphasize the importance of positive beliefs and attitudes, culturally responsive teaching, and effective instruction. In their study on the Hispanic Dropout problem, Lockwood and Secada (1999) state, “Hispanic students deserve to be treated as if they matter” (p. 3). The report’s overarching findings and recommendations include the following:

- “Schools and school staff must connect themselves—both institutionally and personally—to Hispanic students and their families, provide Hispanic students with a high-quality education based on rigorous standards, and provide backup options to push both students and staff past obstacles that come up on the way to achieving those rigorous standards.”
- “Students and their families deserve respect. In many cases, this means that school staff and other educational stakeholders must change long-held conceptions of Hispanic students and their families. These stakeholders need to see Hispanic students as central to the future well-being of the United States rather than as foreign and unwelcome. They also need to recognize that Hispanic families have social capital on which to build. Hispanic students deserve genuine opportunities to learn and to succeed in later life—rather than being dismissed as deficient because of their language and culture” (p. 3).

Another report summarizes factors associated with academic achievement of Hispanic students. In addition to the development of language skills, other improvements in instructional quality and school environment are equally important. Five teaching practices that researchers suggest work well with Hispanic students include culturally-responsive teaching, cooperative learning, instructional conversations, cognitively-guided instruction, and technology-enriched instruction. Educational experiences for Hispanic students also improve in classrooms characterized by a sense of belonging and student and community empowerment (Padron, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002).

Recommendations for decreasing dropouts among Native American students include many similar characteristics. Researchers assert that these students benefit from active learning, caring teachers, culturally relevant curriculum and instruction, and small learning environments (Reyhner, 1992; St. Germaine, 1995).

Gay (2002) suggests learning opportunities that work well with students of color and are consistent with culturally responsive teaching. Although she does not explicitly

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<sup>7</sup>The report is available on OSPI’s Web site in MS Word and PDF format at <http://www.k12.wa.us/Research/>.

address dropouts in this discussion, she notes that certain instructional practices are likely to increase the relevance of schools for at-risk students. Her suggestions include:

- “Getting students personally involved in their own learning
- Using varied formats, multiple perspectives, and novelty in teaching
- Responding to multiple learning styles
- Modeling in teaching and learning
- Using cooperation and collaboration among students to achieve common learning outcomes
- Learning by doing
- Incorporating different types of skill development (e.g., intellectual, social, emotional, moral) in teaching and learning experiences
- Transferring knowledge from one form or context to another
- Combining knowledge, concepts, and theory with practice . . .
- Students reflecting critically on their knowledge, beliefs, thoughts, and actions” (p. 196).

Researchers suggest some instructional practices appear to be particularly effective with Black, Native American, and Hispanic students. Examples from these studies are summarized in a 2006 research synthesis on high school reform (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

### **INCREASING STUDENT SENSE OF BELONGING AND ENGAGEMENT**

For students to learn rigorous content and to complete their schooling, they need to be engaged and feel a sense of belonging in the school community. Smith (1991) suggests that “. . . instead of thinking of potential dropouts as qualitatively different from other students, it is perhaps more accurate to think of all students on a continuum running between the poles of marginal-disengaged to member-engaged” (p. 72). Student engagement implies more than motivation. Newmann (1991) makes this distinction: “Academic motivation usually refers to a general desire or disposition to succeed in academic work and in the more specific tasks of school.” Engagement is “a construct used to describe an inner quality of concentration and effort to learn” (p. 13).

Finn (1989) uses identification and participation as components of a model for understanding dropping out. His premise is that “participation in school activities (both classroom and extracurricular activities) is essential in order for positive outcomes, including the students’ sense of belonging and valuing school related goals, to be realized” (p. 129). Identification with school “denotes perceptions of congruence of the self” with the school or social group “in the form of shared values or sense of belonging” (p. 134).

Increasing students’ sense of belonging and their involvement or engagement in their learning will require substantive changes in the way schools are generally designed, particularly at the secondary level. Two approaches to achieving these goals, though not mutually exclusive, are (1) personalizing schools and (2) increasing student

engagement. Extensive research and professional literature develop these two approaches, and several studies are highlighted below.

### Increasing Student Belonging by Personalizing Schools

Research on student commitment to institutions supports the importance of school membership (Tinto in Wehlage et al., 1989). Students' sense of belonging, frequently called school membership, can be defined as bonding with the school that develops "when students establish affective, cognitive, and behavioral connections to the institution." Schools have responsibility for creating conditions so that students experience a sense of membership. As noted earlier, student belonging is enhanced when schools reflect purpose, equity, personal support, opportunities for success, and a school climate based on caring (Newmann, 1991, p. 20).

Personalizing school experience makes a difference for students, both socially and academically. More personal attention and adaptation of schooling practices to individual needs influence students' attitudes, commitment to school, and their willingness to take risks in their learning. Teachers who know students well, who take time to explain and reteach as needed, encourage and support students' efforts to learn—in other words, "do what it takes"—make a difference. In their study of fourteen alternative schools, Wehlage et al. (1989) report that "effective schools provide at-risk students with a community of support." The schools that successfully reduce or prevent student dropout create a "supportive environment that helped students overcome impediments to membership and engagement" (p. 223). Because students are particularly vulnerable during transitions between schools, educators "must create friendly and supportive school environments and pay close attention to students' needs" at these times (Lan & Lanthier, 2003, p. 327).

Teachers and staff in smaller school environments have more opportunity to personalize schools than do teachers in large schools. Researchers who have looked at private independent and Catholic schools cite school size as instrumental in the relationships that develop in them (Lee & Burkam, 2000; Woods, 1995). Personalizing schools, however, requires more than simply reducing the numbers. Small numbers make the task of personalization more manageable, however, and provide opportunities to help "safeguard against alienation (Newmann, 1989, p. 161). Other changes must occur including more positive interactions between teachers and students, supportive school climate, and enhancing student capacity to succeed in school (Cotton, 1996, 2001; Raywid, 1999).

A national effort to personalize high schools through small learning communities was initiated in 2000 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The initiative supports the startup of new small schools and conversion of existing large high schools into autonomous small schools that may share a building. In addition to size, the Foundation's program expects schools to offer challenging, inquiry-based curriculum that is motivating, rigorous, and preparatory to college. Because the initiative is relatively new, statistics on dropout rates in these schools do not exist. However, preliminary findings from a comparative survey of several grant schools indicate that



small schools appear to improve the experiences of young people. Specifically, relationships between adults and students were deeper and more supportive, both academically and personally, in small schools than in pre-conversion large schools. These findings, however, cannot be seen as evidence of a causal connection between school size and student outcomes (AIR and SRI, 2003).

**Small School Environments** Creating and constructing small school buildings are, of course, one means of providing small, personal learning environments. However, small buildings may not always be viable. Therefore, programmatic strategies have been devised to work within the context of large comprehensive secondary schools. Three strategies illustrate the possibilities for creating small learning environments.

- Schools within a school This strategy was found effective in countering dropout (Woods, 1995, p. 5) and is implemented in various ways. Some examples, found generally in large comprehensive schools, include separate “academies” around career oriented themes, “houses” for a targeted grade level such as 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and “alternative” classes for targeted students.
- Teaming Groups of students are assigned with a team of teachers for at least a portion of the school day so those teachers can know students better, which builds community within the school.
- Student support through mentors, advocates, advisors, or tutors Schools may organize advisories or homerooms that assign students to an advisor who may stay with them for a period of years and provide academic and social support. Tutoring individually or in small groups also provides personal support for student learning.

These strategies have had varying degrees of success, depending on the specifics of the program, the degree of commitment of the adults in the schools, and the overall levels of support provided to students.

Small class sizes also have potential for helping personalize schools for students at risk of dropping out. Although the research on class size at the secondary level is limited, researchers suggest that student social and academic behavior are influenced by size of classes. Finn, Pannozzo, and Achilles (2003), based on their review of educational research as well as work by psychologists and sociologists, suggest that students in small groups are more likely to participate in class because they are more visible and less able to “hide in the crowd” (p. 327) and more likely to feel a “sense of belonging” (p. 351). According to some studies, there is more group cohesiveness in small classes and less splintering into subgroups that may be counter-productive to academic participation. Researchers also suggest that teachers in small classes have better morale, allow students more latitude in behavior and learning styles, and know students better.

Small school environments have potential to increase the quality of relationships, but so do other school activities and programs. Examples of these are counseling and mentoring programs, cross-age tutoring, project learning or experiential learning, and co-curricular activities.

**Student and Adult Connections** Personalizing schools requires increasing student “attachment to valued adults in school” (Fashola & Slavin, 1997, p. 3), which helps

reduce student alienation, disaffection, and subsequently dropouts. Researchers have examined the importance of social capital in regard to successful school experiences and dropping out. As noted earlier, Croninger and Lee (2001) conclude that teachers are “an important source of social capital for students” and “teacher-based forms of social capital reduce the probability of dropping out by nearly half.” They write, “Positive social relationships can create powerful incentives to attend school, even when schoolwork is difficult and classroom expectations are troublesome” (p. 551). These researchers find that students with low levels of social capital had a higher probability of dropping out of school regardless of other factors related to academic risk.

Students attach considerable importance to teachers’ attitudes and behavior toward them, particularly whether they believe their teachers care (Corbett & Wilson 2002; Delpit, 1995; Farrell, 1990, 1994; Ferguson, 1998; Wehlage et al., 1989). Dropouts connect their memories of a good year in school to the attributes of teachers (Farrell, 1990). Wehlage et al. state that students in the alternative schools they studied judged the schools by saying something to the effect that “This school is better because the teachers here care about me.” The authors explain, “This caring attitude is revealed in different ways, but it is always communicated by active and demonstrated interest on the part of adults for the welfare of students” (p. 131). They also emphasize that educators in the alternative schools they studied assumed that students who had failed in traditional schools could be successful. The students had to be helped to adjust to school, but school also had to adjust to students’ needs. “Most students want to achieve and school membership is contingent upon their demonstrating academic competence to themselves and others” (p. 126). The professionals in these schools believed that the interactions between adults and students are built on mutual respect. Moreover, educators are responsible for taking the “initiative in helping students overcome impediments to social bonding and membership” (p. 135).

In another study, researchers argue for “social scaffolding” or organizational support to help students in navigating the school system to obtain the services and support they require. They maintain that this process fosters “student identities and peer cultures oriented toward academic success” (Mehan, Hubbard, & Lintz in Conchas, 2001, p. 4). As students learn “the ropes,” they can more effectively negotiate the system on their own. The Mehan et al. study, which describes the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program for African American and Latino youth, shows that school context contributes to student academic engagement and can affect students’ sense of optimism or pessimism regarding school experiences.

Practitioners offer advice for building positive relationships. In an article in a recent Educational Leadership, for example, Mendes (2003) encourages educators to:

- “Acknowledge all responses and questions.
- Mention students’ names, skills, ideas, and knowledge in your representations—without mentioning weaknesses or confidential information.
- Use self-disclosure when appropriate. Be a real person.
- Use responses beginning with ‘I agree,’ ‘I appreciate,’ and ‘I respect.’
- Ask students about their interests. Collect an information card at the beginning of the year and have students update it regularly. Pay attention to students’

nonverbal responses and make adjustments as you capture their interest or hit neutral ground.

- Build on what you hear from students by sharing stories, interests, and worries.
- Display empathy with individuals and with classes by communicating what you think their needs or feelings might be.
- Listen actively. Match students' expressions and conveyed moods. Paraphrase their message, when appropriate. Know your students' world and go there first to open the relationship door" (p. 58).

**Supportive School Climate** An optimal school environment is student focused and consequently more personal. According to a set of guidelines for middle school dropout prevention, supportive schools are characterized by:

- "High but flexible expectations for students
- Diverse opportunities for achieving success
- Recognition of students' achievements
- Opportunities for students to define their goals clearly and realistically
- Opportunities to help students monitor their own progress in achieving their goals
- Motivational instruction and activities to heighten students' occupational aspirations
- Early identification of at-risk students
- More extensive guidance and counseling services for at-risk students
- Specific educational plans for dropout-prone at-risk students
- Programs that help students address the conditions and stresses that place them at risk
- Promotion of students' sense of belonging to the school
- Clear, fair, and consistent disciplinary rules
- A high degree of student participation in extracurricular activities
- Intimate and caring work environment for staff and students alike
- Close adult-student relationships" (cited in West 1991, p. 17).

Hixson (1993) stresses that "building on student strengths (e.g., knowledge, experiences, skills, talents, interests, etc.), rather than focusing on remediating real or presumed deficiencies is the key" to improving learning for at-risk students. This aligns with the importance of culturally-responsive instruction that honors the background and experiences students bring to their classrooms (Gay, 2000; Guldin, 2002).

**Building Resilience** The research on resiliency provides an approach for creating a personalized and supportive school climate that can assist students in overcoming adversity and increasing their chances of staying in school. Educational resiliency is defined as "the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994, cited in Waxman, Gray, & Patron, 2003).

According to Benard (1993), a resilient child has social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future. Garmezy (in NCREL, 1994) describes resiliency with these traits: “effectiveness in work, play, and love; healthy expectations and a positive outlook; self-esteem and internal locus of control; self-discipline; and problem-solving and critical thinking skills and humor” (p. 7). Along with family and community, schools have a role in helping students develop resiliency. According to Benard, families, schools, and communities foster resilience through caring and support, positive expectations, and ongoing opportunities for participation. When families and communities are not working well for children, however, schools become more important. Specific strategies that schools can use to promote resiliency include:

- “Ensure each child some significant contact with a supportive adult.
- Develop peer support programs.
- Train students in self-motivation.
- Create circuit-breaker mechanisms for intervening in negative chains of events that jeopardize students.
- Develop learning approaches that build on the prior cultural knowledge children bring to school, rather than exploiting their weaknesses.
- Pursue topics of personal interest to each child.
- Bring integrated social services into the school” (NCREL, 1994, p. 7).

The findings in this body of research can help educators consider and modify elements in the school to create productive, healthy environments that foster resiliency. Waxman et al. suggest proactive approaches to help a school develop educational resilience: Professional development based on classroom observations and feedback on perceptions of resilient and non-resilient students’ about the learning environment and their experiences; changing classroom instruction to be more engaging, focused on student goals, with immediate feedback; and promoting a supportive, nurturing, trusting school environment for both teachers and students.

Some schools have considered “asset building” as a means for increasing resiliency and preventing dropping out and other high-risk behaviors. From a series of survey studies conducted between 1990–1995, the Search Institute identified 40 external and internal developmental assets critical to the well-being of young people. Enhancing these assets is an approach for creating a nurturing school. *External* assets include four categories: (1) support in all areas of life, (2) empowerment through service to others and feeling valued and safe, (3) boundaries and expectations that include rules and consequences, positive role models and peer influences, and high expectations, and (4) constructive use of time through activities that foster personal growth. *Internal* assets include commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies such as interpersonal skills, decision making, conflict resolution, resistance skills and cultural competence, and positive self-identity (Davis & Race, 2003, p. 23-24). Schools can develop and implement programs and activities that foster these assets.

Increasing Student Engagement with Effective Instruction and Meaningful Curriculum

Reformers call for curriculum and instruction that is rigorous, relevant, and incorporates advanced thinking skills along with basic skills. Increasing student engagement for students at risk of dropping out requires the same kind of curriculum and instruction. In their study of dropout programs, Wehlage et al. (1989) conclude that students at risk of failure traditionally are not provided appropriately challenging experiences and too little is expected of them. They write, “It is not surprising that an education that may consist of little more than a series of curricular hoops leading to graduation fails to engage or inspire at-risk students. These students need educational experiences that draw them into the learning process by igniting their imagination, interest, and commitment to others. An emphasis on remediation or the mastery of isolated facts or skills seems unlikely to alter their less-than-positive orientation to learning, yet it is just this orientation that must be changed if at-risk youth are to carve out a satisfactory place for themselves in our increasingly demanding economy” (p. 216). The authors are also critical of some alternative schools on this point. Although the researchers found that these schools developed social communities to meet the personal needs of students and keep them in school, many did not provide sufficiently for the academic needs of their students.

Instruction that is personally relevant and meaningful in the world beyond the classroom is more likely to ignite the imagination and interest than the remedial coursework frequently offered to potential dropouts. Authentic pedagogy, teaching for understanding, and constructivist instruction are terms, though not exact synonyms, used to describe effective, engaging instruction that reflects the principles of learning. In addition, other approaches to curriculum design and classroom practice suggest ways to increase relevance and rigor in classrooms.

**Authentic Pedagogy** Authentic pedagogy is a framework for engaging instruction developed by Newmann and Wehlage (1995). The standards include: (1) construction of knowledge with high order thinking skills, (2) disciplined inquiry including deep knowledge of content and its complexities and substantive conversation through which students and teachers engage in extended discussions to promote understanding, and (3) value beyond school as students make connections between their learning and public problems or personal experiences. In other words, when authentic pedagogy is implemented, students are focused and connected with rigorous and meaningful content, have opportunity for interaction with other students as they gain understanding of the content, and apply what they learn in “real world” contexts for purposes other than pleasing the teacher. Newmann et al. developed the authentic pedagogy framework from research conducted over five years in 24 schools and 130 classrooms across a number of states and school districts with additional data from surveys and several four-year case studies in restructuring schools. In their study, students in classrooms that reflected the components or standards of authentic pedagogy achieved at higher levels than others, across socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups.

In their work on student engagement, Newmann et al. drew from research in psychology, sociology, and studies of schooling to identify several important factors.

They write that engagement in academic work results “largely from three broad factors: (1) students’ underlying need for competence, (2) the extent to which students experience membership in the school, and (3) the authenticity of the work they are asked to complete” (Newman et al., 1992, p. 17). Authentic work is characterized by tasks that are considered “meaningful, valuable, significant, and worthy of one’s effort . . .” (p. 23). These tasks are also connected to the real world and should offer opportunity for “fun.” School work is more authentic when it exemplifies characteristics of adult work such as having impact on others outside the classroom, providing clear and prompt feedback, encouraging collaboration with peers and authorities, and offering flexibility in use of time. Because learning is hard work, student engagement is more likely to be sustained when there are opportunities for humor, play, and fun.

Students are more willing to make persistent efforts in their learning when they believe their schoolwork is important. The degree of importance they attribute to their schoolwork is linked to their interests, relevance to work in the real world, their friends’ and parents’ perceptions of learning as valuable, and the enthusiasm and engagement of their teachers (Murphy et al., 2001).

**Improving Curriculum Design** Several educational experts suggest other approaches to designing curriculum to increase student engagement and learning. To increase student involvement, Strong et al. (2003) advocate for curriculum based on four natural human interests, reflective of the factors used by Newmann. These interests are: “the drive toward mastery, the drive to understand, the drive toward self-expression, and the need to relate” (p. 25). From their work with several schools, districts, and students, Strong et al. devised a rubric for curriculum design that raises questions related to each interest and a survey tool to help identify student interests. They encourage educators to learn how to design curriculum around student interests and to differentiate instruction to appeal to learners with all styles. Here are excerpts from one of their rubrics including the four interests:

- **Mastery** “Is the goal of the unit defined in terms of a product or performance? Have students been involved in analyzing the competencies and qualities of the product or performance?”
- **Understanding** “Is the unit organized around provocative questions? Are the sources used in the unit sufficiently challenging and based on powerful ideas? Are students able to critique and correct their own and others’ products and ideas?”
- **Interpersonal** “How closely connected to the real world are the content and products of the unit? How well designed is the use of audiences, clients, and customers as ways to stimulate reflection and improvement?”
- **Self-Expression** “How strong a role does choice play in the unit? How regularly are strategies for creative thinking modeled?” (p. 26).

Wiggins and McTighe (1998) provide guidelines for developing curriculum and assessments that increase student understanding and involvement in their learning. Although not presented as a solution for dropping out, the guidelines can help teachers

create engaging classroom instruction. They developed the acronym **WHERE** to guide teachers in designing curricular activities:

- “**W**here are we headed?” Give students reasons for the goal and their responsibilities for performance, and help them see the purpose for the work from their point of view.
- “**H**ook the student through engaging and provocative entry points.” Use effective questions and problems that challenge, focus, and engage students.
- “**E**xplore and enable/equip.” Identify learning experiences that allow students to explore big ideas, and provide them with guided instruction and coaching in the skills and knowledge they need.
- “**R**eflect and rethink.” Help students to dig deeper into issues, self-assess and revise their thinking, and refine their learning and the products they create.
- “**E**xhibit and evaluate.” Involve students in final self-assessments, set future goals, and look toward new areas of learning (p. 115-116).

Increasing student engagement requires educators to create or change school conditions to improve the learning environment. Educators can borrow and apply characteristics described by Csikszentmihalyi in his theory *Flow: Optimal Experience*. Curriculum and instruction developed around personal goals, immediate and appropriate feedback, and challenging tasks that are balanced with the skill level of students may help students experience heightened concentration and commitment. In most secondary school settings, extracurricular activities are more likely to reflect these characteristics than academic work. However, classrooms can be structured around these characteristics, for example through project based or experiential learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Scherer, 2002).

\* \* \* \* \*

This chapter has presented strategies for school change that have the potential for reducing student dropout. The comprehensive school improvement initiative of the last several years holds promise for creating wholesome school environments and improving teaching and learning. If these goals are accomplished, schools will be more successful in adapting to the needs of students and increasing their “holding power” so fewer students drop out. Strategies for creating high performing schools and for closing the achievement gap will serve potential dropouts well.

Other strategies for increasing student engagement and sense of school membership, which are embedded in school improvement, also must be implemented for students to learn at high levels and to feel they belong in schools. Wehlage et al. (1989) stress that to keep students in school and to support their learning, schools must be communities of learning as well as communities of support. They write that “many programs for at-risk students have succeeded admirably in creating schools that overcome social isolation and alienation. The communities of support they offer do draw students back to school. Now these programs must find ways to transform their communities of support into communities of learning and labor, communities in which students learn to value exerting effort and overcoming challenges through working on shared projects that are clearly meaningful and useful to themselves and others” (p. 220).

Although restructuring has high potential for holding students and improving their educational experiences, there undoubtedly will continue to be students for whom special programs and activities will be necessary, although hopefully the numbers will decrease over time. The next chapter describes specific programs and schools for dropout prevention and dropout recovery or retrieval.



## CHAPTER 6

# DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY PROGRAMS

Specific programs for dropouts focus on preventing dropouts and the recovery of students who have dropped out. Prevention programs attempt to serve students at risk of dropping out and, therefore, intervene early to keep students in school. Recovery or re-entry programs recruit students back into an educational setting or support the attainment of a diploma or GED. Dropout programs may be offered within traditional schools or through alternative schools.

The programs for prevention include early intervention programs, supplemental in-school and out-of-school enhancement programs and practices, alternative programs, and alternative schools. Recovery programs may include alternative programs and alternative schools as well. The programs and schools are organized into these categories to help explain their primary purposes. However, the distinctions are not always precise. Some programs could very well be considered both prevention and recovery. This chapter provides examples of programs and services to illustrate the scope of strategies.

Many programs, unfortunately, have not collected sufficient data or conducted rigorous research and evaluation studies to determine their effectiveness (Prevatt & Kelly, 2003). Shargel and Smink (2001) report the evaluation studies of dropout demonstration programs sponsored by the Department of Education from 1991–1996. They summarize, “The general findings from an evaluation of twenty selected programs, with data collected from more than 10,000 students, reflected very disappointing results. No program was able to improve all key outcomes examined, such as dropping out, attendance, test scores, and grades. However, the evaluation did show evidence that alternative schools are effective with at-risk students who can demonstrate their commitment to succeed” (p. 119).

In spite of a dearth of experimental studies, anecdotal evidence and case studies reveal promising practices. Rumberger (2001) offers these features common to such programs:

- “A non-threatening environment for learning;
- A caring and committed staff who accepted a personal responsibility for student success;
- A school culture that encourages staff risk-taking, self governance, and professional collegiality;
- A school structure that provided for a low student-teacher ratio and a small size to promote student engagement” (p. 27).

The following sections describe components of effective prevention and recovery strategies described in the research and professional literature. Much of this information is also contained in the OSPI report about promising programs and practices for

dropout prevention. This report also describes some programs that have been implemented in Washington (Shannon & Bylsma, 2005).

### **PREVENTION THROUGH EARLY INTERVENTION**

Early intervention programs generally include programs for preschool and elementary children. Schargel and Smink (2001) address early intervention as the first of fifteen strategies for dropout prevention. Within this strategy they include programs and practices such as comprehensive family involvement, solid early childhood education, and strong reading and writing programs. They stress that providing the “best possible classroom instruction from the beginning” is the most effective way to reduce the number of students who may drop out of school (p. 41). They assert that birth-to-three intervention programs have demonstrated that early enrichment can modify a child’s IQ.

An effective preschool program cited frequently in the literature is the High/Scope Perry Pre-School program. An extensive evaluation of the program compared preschool group members with no-preschool group members and followed students through their school careers. The evaluation revealed remarkable outcomes. According to Rumberger (2001), members of the preschool program groups experienced social and economic benefits including “reduced crime rate, higher earning, and reduced welfare dependence.” He writes, “In terms of education, one-third as many preschool program group members as no-preschool program group members graduated from regular or adult high school or received GED (71 percent versus 54 percent).” These outcomes occurred 13 years or more after the intervention ended. This study suggests that “early interventions for persons at risk of dropping out can be effective” (p. 26).

### **PREVENTION THROUGH SUPPLEMENTAL PROGRAMS**

Supplemental support programs often assist identified students within the traditional school. Such support is also offered through out-of-school enhancement programs. Some supplemental services may be considered dropout prevention programs even though they probably do not bear that formal designation. Student assistance, service learning, and mentoring are educational approaches that supplement regular coursework. Suggestions for planning and implementing an in-school dropout prevention program are summarized in the literature (Lovitt, 2000; Schargel & Smink, 2001; Smith, 1991). Guidelines for developing targeted programs are offered later in this chapter.

**Added Support** Supplemental in-school programs provide additional support through a variety of approaches: tutorials, double class periods in targeted content areas such as math or language, before or after-school homework clubs, or activity periods, Saturday school, and summer school. These programs often are intended to help students complete homework and critical courses, and many provide incentives to increase student attendance. Some of these supplemental programs provide students “more of the same” in the way of subject content and teaching strategies. Others offer students enriched learning opportunities and include community resources such as technology, field trips, or career mentors to help students see relevance in the school work and

encourage their “sticking to it.” Some programs have links to vocational education, internships, or part time work. The theme of these activities is to help students see the links between their schooling and their future lives.

**Student Assistance** Student assistance programs for young people who have drug and alcohol problems are generally offered as in-school supplemental services. Reconnecting Youth, developed by Eggert at the University of Washington, is a school-based program for high school students that was designed to decrease drug involvement, increase school performance, and decrease emotional distress. The program includes a semester class, activities to promote school bonding, parent involvement as well as a school crisis response plan. Programs to address violence and conflict help make school environments safer which may help keep students in school. Schargel and Smink (2000) list Second Step, a school-based social skills curriculum, Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E), and peer mediation as examples of programs designed to deal with violence and conflict. A safe and supportive school environment is important for student learning and for “holding” students in school, so such programs can legitimately be among the overall strategies considered by schools and districts.

**Service Learning** Service learning programs, or projects, are examples of supplemental in-school programs. Service learning is a means for addressing the negative conditions that some students experience at school, e.g., little or no academic success, problems getting along with teachers or peers, and feeling alienated from school. Service learning provides students an opportunity to develop academic, social, and problem-solving skills as well as to enhance their sense of independence, self esteem, and purpose through meaningful projects. Particularly popular in middle schools, service learning provides a “hands-on” relevant context through which students can serve their communities and schools while they learn.

Schargel and Smink cite research that shows “in more than half of the high-quality service learning schools studied, students showed moderate to strong gains on achievement tests in language arts or reading, improved engagement in school, an improved sense of educational accomplishment, and better homework completion” (p. 103). Other studies also associated service learning with improved achievement as demonstrated by grades or test scores. Additional research is needed, but service learning is a promising strategy.

**Mentoring** Mentoring has emerged as a strategy for fostering positive relationships, improving learning, and potentially reducing dropouts. Mentoring takes many forms but essentially matches individuals to provide guidance and support in one-on-one relationships or in small groups. Mentoring promotes personal interactions that build healthy relationships among students and among students and adults in a school. Students may be mentored by teachers, community members, or older students. Mentoring may include academic support but does not always. Personal support, social support, and career exploration are also contexts for mentoring.

Mentoring may take various forms. Teachers may be assigned as advocates for identified students. “Invisible” mentoring is a practice in which staff informally and regularly seek out a student with the intention of making personal contacts without making an overt or formal announcement to students (Davis & Race, 2003). Schargel and Smink list a variety of approaches including traditional mentoring (such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America), group or co-mentoring, peer mentoring (such as Boys and Girls Clubs), team mentoring (with small groups), intergenerational mentoring (such as Foster Grandparents or Retired Senior citizens), and telementoring (such as the Hewlett-Packard Telementor Program). Suggestions for planning and implementing mentoring programs are included in their book.

### **PREVENTION THROUGH OUT-OF-SCHOOL ENHANCEMENT PROGRAMS**

Independent enhancement programs have been developed and implemented over the years. More recently the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers program through the U. S. Department of Education provides resources for out-of-school supplemental programs. Out-of-school programs serve various student groups and differ in goals and program components. Some supplemental programs specifically serve students of color and poverty. Many are funded through federal or private grants; for example, the Federal School Dropout Demonstration Assistance program, mentioned earlier, operated in 85 different schools and communities in the 1990s (Schargel & Smink, 2001). The programs frequently provide both academic and social support. Some, such as Upward Bound, encourage college attendance.

Several authors describe examples of out-of-school enhancement programs and report evaluation results, which are cited below (Rumberger, 2001; Fashola & Slavin, 1997; Dynarski, 2000).

**Supplemental Program Evaluation** Evaluations of supplemental programs have been mixed. A case in point, reported by Rumberger, is the Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success or ALAS, a supplemental though quite comprehensive program that addressed family, community, and school factors. Rumberger reports that this program improved middle school students’ school experiences when they were in the program. Students in the program passed more classes, were absent less often, and accumulated more high school graduation credits than students in a comparison group. The effects were not sustained after the support program ended, however.

Fashola and Slavin report evaluations of six dropout prevention and college attendance programs for Latino students. Dropout intervention for language minority youth include programs such as the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Programs (VYP) which began in Texas and was funded in 1990 for additional states. This program has several goals: improving academic success, improving language skills, strengthening students’ self perceptions, and increasing student-school-family partnerships. Secondary students are hired as tutors for young children. ALAS was mentioned above. Other programs include Upward Bound, Project AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), which exists in California schools particularly in San Diego County and was recently implemented in some middle and high schools in Federal Way School District in

Washington, and Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams), implemented in Texas. MESA (Mathematics Engineering and Science Achievement) focuses on helping middle and high school students succeed in science and mathematics courses and encourages them to attend college. Created in California in 1970, MESA has expanded into other states, including Washington.

Fashola and Slavin point out common themes among the six programs they reviewed:

- Personalization, small group intervention or mentoring, creating meaningful relationships between adults and students.
- Connecting students to an attainable future.
- Targeted academic assistance.
- Providing students status and recognition within the school.

The authors note that not enough evidence exists to determine the most effective or cost effective of these approaches. However, these six programs demonstrate that there is sufficient knowledge about promising programs to incorporate their strategies into dropout interventions.

Dynarski (2000) summarizes evaluations of alternative programs funded through the Federal Dropout Demonstration project. Two supplemental projects for middle school students, for example, are located within regular schools but separate the students from other students for much of the school day. The programs are Project COMET in Miami, Florida, and Project ACCEL in Newark, New Jersey. He writes, “Supplemental programs had almost no impacts on student outcomes. None of the programs affected the dropout rate, and average student grades, test scores, and attendance were similar among treatment and control group students” (p. 3).

**Communities in School** An organization that provides out-of-school enhancement as well as some in-school programs is Communities in Schools (formerly Cities in Schools), a national network of community-based organizations that focus on preventing dropout. Its mission is “. . . to champion the connection of needed community resources with schools, to help young people successfully learn, stay in school and prepare for life.” The programs differ by locale but adhere to a set of five basic principles. Communities in Schools believes that every child needs and deserves

- a personal relationship with a caring adult
- a safe place to learn and grow
- a healthy start for a healthy future
- a marketable skill to use upon graduation
- a chance to give back.

In its annual report for 2001–2002, Communities in Schools reports that 72 percent of tracked youth improved their attendance, 81 percent had fewer incidents of discipline, 78 percent improved their academic performance, 95 percent were promoted, 83 percent of eligible seniors graduated, and the overall dropout rate for CIS-tracked students was 3 percent (Morris, 2003). There are several Communities in Schools projects in Washington State, affiliated with school districts, foundations, businesses, and, in one case, a partnership including a professional athletic team (see <http://www.cisnet.org>).

### **PREVENTION THROUGH ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS**

Alternative in-school programs are akin to schools-within-a-school or pull-out programs of various sorts. Alternative classrooms may operate as a self-contained classroom within a traditional school and simply offer varied programs to serve at-risk students. Schools within a school may be housed in traditional schools but offer specialized programs. Some may be quite autonomous. Schools without walls may be attached to the traditional school but deliver educational and training programs at various community locations, perhaps as work-related opportunities (Schargel & Smink, 2001).

**Schools within Schools** These schools may be created for at-risk students and often are organized by academic or career interests. As mentioned earlier, schools within schools may identify students with certain risk factors and schedule them together for academic or social support. Legters and Kerr (2000) studied programs for students at critical transition times such as ninth grade. In their study of Maryland high schools, they note that many schools provide supplemental support for ninth grade students in the form of a school-within-a-school, academy or other small learning community, or offer an extra period of instruction for some students. Some high schools have implemented an interdisciplinary team approach for ninth grade students. The authors state that “the group of schools that reported using the school-within-a-school practice in a widespread, sustained way in 1999–00 made substantial gains in promotion and achievement and succeeded in lowering dropout rates from the period between 1993–94 through 1999–00” (p. 18). They assert that the organizational structure played a significant role in the reform process in these schools, although they caution that the small number of schools and available survey data prevent concluding a causal relationship between the practice and the outcome.

Talent Development Schools, a model discussed in Chapter 5, incorporate a number of in-school approaches. School academies are organized around a “ninth-grade success academy” and supplemented with extra time and opportunity for making up failed credits, learning content and skills that may have been missed, and developing study and social skills through special classes. Upper grades in these schools are organized into career academies (McPartland & Jordan, 2000).

The Gates Foundation’s National School District and Network Grants program supports the development of both small learning communities and the redesign of large high schools into groups of small schools. As the program is evaluated over a five-year period and the schools mature, information on successful models and student outcomes will become available. In addition, the Foundation has funded a number of Washington state schools to create model schools that provide small, personalized learning environments that foster high achievement for all students.

**Alternative Education** Alternative education is an inclusive term used to describe alternative learning experiences and programs that may or may not be linked closely with traditional schools. Some of these programs are self-paced, competency-based, and feature computer-assisted curriculum and/or independent study. Some serve home-schooled students and provide classes or laboratory experiences that are difficult to

teach at home, such as music or science laboratories. Many alternative programs provide flexible schedules and reduced numbers of days or hours in class. Some programs are contract-based so students meet regularly with an instructional advisor but do not attend classes. Some are designed primarily to assist students in returning to the comprehensive high school; these re-entry programs provide skills and help students improve attendance.

Alternative programs abound in Washington State. A 2003-2004 OSPI list of alternative programs identifies 239 programs in 91 school districts ([www.k12.wa.us/AlternativeEd/pubdocs/03-04AlternativeSchoolList.xls](http://www.k12.wa.us/AlternativeEd/pubdocs/03-04AlternativeSchoolList.xls)). Little scientifically-based evaluation has been conducted on the effectiveness of alternative education programs; this is area that deserves more research.

### **PREVENTION AND RECOVERY THROUGH ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS**

Alternative schools, sometimes called second-chance schools, are created as separate organizations for potential dropouts or to recruit dropouts back into school. The definition of an alternative education school, according to the Common Core of Data, is “a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education” (cited in Lehr, Moreau, Lanners, & Lange, 2003, p. 2). These schools take on various forms.

In 2001 the U.S. Department of Education funded the Alternative Schools Research Project, a multi-year study that also includes special education concerns. According to a preliminary report of the study, based on a survey of state personnel, alternative schools most often serve students with a history of poor attendance, behavior problems, suspension or expulsion, learning difficulties, external stressors, social/emotional problems, and referral from court systems.

**Alternative Schools** Alternative schools or learning centers may have a specific focus or theme. For example, they may focus on parenting skills and/or offer special job skills. They may be located in business environments (in store fronts), community centers, or they may have buildings constructed for their needs. These schools are generally characterized by small numbers of students, caring cultures, and relative autonomy in governance.

Schargel and Smink (2001) list several educational practices commonly found in alternative schools:

- “A maximum teacher / student ratio of 1:10
- A small student base not exceeding 250 students
- A clearly stated mission and discipline code
- Caring faculty with continual staff development
- School staff having high expectations for student achievement
- A learning program specific to the student’s expectations and learning style
- A flexible school schedule with community involvement and support

- Total commitment to help each student achieve success” (p. 117).

An extensive study of alternative schools was conducted by Wehlage et al. (1989) and reported in their book *Reducing the Risk: Schools as Communities of Support*. The researchers conducted a search for effective schools and received nominations from key informants. From a list of more than sixty schools, they ultimately selected fourteen to study. Four of these programs are mentioned here to illustrate a range of program approaches.

- Media Academy, Fremont High School, Oakland, California, is a school-within-a-school that serves inner city Black and Hispanic students. It offers an academic curriculum with hands-on experiences.
- Two Majors at a Time (TMAT) at Orr Community Academy in Chicago, Illinois, provides students the opportunity to increase their learning time in given subjects.
- Wayne Enrichment Center in Indianapolis focuses on family and workplace as the means for improving student relationships and work habits.
- New Futures School, Albuquerque, New Mexico, is a program that serves pregnant or mothering teens.

**Schools of Choice** Magnet and charter schools are types of alternative schools that have potential to serve students at risk of dropping out. These categories of schools are commonly called schools of choice. Magnet schools typically focus on selected curriculum areas with specialized teachers. Charter schools may be theme oriented or implement other features around program, behavior, or expectations. Charter schools operate in some states as autonomous educational entities that receive state support without having to meet the usual regulatory provisions of public schools.

Coalition Campus Schools in New York, a form of magnet schools, have improved graduation rates and lowered dropout rates by making completion of school an integral part of the school programs. Students in these schools, who represent a diverse population, are more likely to graduate, remain in school beyond the four-year period if needed to complete high school, and to attend college than students in other city schools. Central Park East Secondary School, a pioneering member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, is featured often in the reform literature. Among other significant features, the school incorporates expectations for graduation through the coursework over the students’ school career (Ancess & Wichterle, 2001).

**Cyber Schools** Cyber schools, or virtual schools, are a recent addition to the list of potential alternative schools available for dropout prevention or recovery. The *New York Times* described the Western Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School and the students who were graduating from high school in a June 2003 article. The article reports the increasing number of these schools: 67 schools with nearly 16,000 students in states such as Pennsylvania, California, Washington, Ohio, Florida, Arizona, and 11 other states. Several students described the problems they experienced getting along in traditional schools and their preference for computer-based education. Although online learning and virtual classrooms may be a workable approach for some students, issues and concerns arise over accountability, quality of education, and the impact of limited or sporadic contact with other people (Rimer, 2003).



### **RECOVERY THROUGH CONTINUATION SCHOOLS OR PROGRAMS**

Other examples of alternative school models are Middle Colleges and adult high schools found on community college campuses. Another example of a recovery program is the Job Corps. These models serve many students who have severed connections with the regular high school. They may also enroll students who are on the “verge” of dropping out.

**Middle Colleges** The Middle College concept was developed in 1974 in New York as a partnership between City University and the Board of Education. Middle Colleges are alternative high schools housed on community college campuses designed to give disengaged high school students a fresh start. Students served are often bright students who do not fit into the traditional high school. Since it began, the program has grown to college campuses around the country. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recently provided grants to start more of these schools.

Middle Colleges generally strive to improve attendance, academic performance, graduation rates, job placement rates, and encourage students to pursue higher education. The programs do not include many non-academic programs. They generally offer academic counseling, small classes, tutoring, and staff support. Many require internships of some type. Because these programs are located on community college sites, they help bridge secondary and higher education by providing proximity to college students as peer role models. They may also offer dual enrollment to allow students to receive both college and high school credit (Donahoo, 2002).

Seattle Community College campuses include Middle Colleges, each of which has a somewhat different focus. These are South Seattle Community College, Indian Heritage at North Seattle Community College, and the Middle College High School Education Resource Center at Northgate Mall. The programs serve students age 16–20 who have dropped out or are near dropping out. The students who are admitted to these programs are screened to ensure that they are motivated to succeed. Graduates receive a high school diploma through Seattle Public Schools.

Dynarski (2000) includes the Middle College High School in Seattle in his evaluation of dropout programs. The evaluation of this program reports “higher high school completion rates and lower GED completion rate for students whose characteristics suggested that they were least likely to drop out (termed ‘low risk’ students . . . though most were at some risk of dropping out). The school also reduced dropping out for high-risk students” (p. 6).

Career Education Options Program, a dropout recovery program at Shoreline Community College in Seattle, was recognized in 2003 by the National Dropout Prevention Network for helping students stay in school and improving their employment opportunities. This program, works with OSPI, Shoreline School District, and the King County Work Training Program to fund tuition, books, supplies, and transportation in order to help students earn a professional-technical associate degree or a GED. Launched in 1995, the program served 514 students in 2002-03. About 80

students complete their GED annually, with nearly all of them continuing their education by taking college classes.

**Adult High Schools** Adult High Schools exist on many community college campuses. These programs provide the core curriculum required to meet state high school graduation requirements. They have instructors and counselors who are committed to meeting the needs of adult students. The programs offer some flexibility to adapt to the personal and family needs of adults. Harrell (1999) describes the program at Edmonds Community College in Lynnwood, Washington, in her study of adult high school students. The impact of the new state standards for graduation—including exit exams and graduation projects—on adult programs at community colleges remains to be seen. Students who receive an adult diploma in these settings are considered to be graduates with a regular diploma under *No Child Left Behind*.

**Job Corps** The national Job Corps is another example of a continuation or recovery program and provides integrated academic, vocational, and social skills training for disadvantaged youth. Job Corps, created in 1964, is an education and job training program for at-risk young people age 16–24. The program is a public-private partnership administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment & Training Administration, and Office of Youth Services. The program provides career development services, assists young adults in obtaining the skills they need for their goals, and provides support to launch them into jobs or further education. Since it began, the Job Corps has served more than two million young people. Four Job Corps Centers in Washington serve roughly 200–325 students each, depending on program capacity, and offer a range of vocational offerings. (More information is available on the Job Corps Web site at <http://www.jobcorps.org/>).

**GED Preparation Programs** Some alternative programs primarily help students complete the General Educational Development certification. GED certificates are earned by students who leave traditional high schools. Dynarski (2000) describes three alternative schools in this category. Flowers with Care Program, in Queens, New York, and Metropolitan Youth Academy, in St. Louis, Missouri, were developed to help students prepare for the GED. Student Training and Re-entry Program in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is “a transition program” for high school dropouts created to help students determine their educational goals, most often the GED certification. These programs do help students earn their GED certificates. Students in these programs are also slightly more likely to complete their diplomas than control group students. Students who start in GED preparation programs can return to high school or another program that leads to a diploma. Of these programs, the St. Louis program had the largest impact, “with 39 percent of the treatment group earning a GED or a high school diploma within three years, compared to 22 percent of control group students” (p. 8).

According to the requirements of *No Child Left Behind*, students who earn a GED certificate are considered dropouts. Since the law requires a graduation rate indicator for a school and district to make adequate yearly progress, this provision may encourage educators to find ways to help students stay in school rather than leave to pursue a GED. However, the law may also discourage schools and districts from

establishing dropout recovery programs that would be helpful to students but could potentially lower the graduation rate if these students do not graduate with a regular diploma in the normal amount of time.

Alternative schools in all categories offer important options for students. The numbers of alternative schools have increased significantly in the last 15 years—the number grew from about 450 in 1988 to approximately 11,000 in 2000 (Thomas, 2003). Clearly “no tolerance” policies have been responsible for the creation of some of these alternative placements. The quality of these schools is uneven, however. Often accountability is limited, and the schools may suffer from limited funding and be seen as less legitimate than traditional schools. In the studies of alternative schools discussed in this chapter, school staff describes the struggle to remain “alive” as an entity. Mainstream teachers and administrators may minimize the importance of the alternative school, believe they lack standards, and that they are little more than “holding pens” for some difficult students. Alternative schools must ensure rigorous academic learning as well as create supportive environments that welcome, value, and nurture young people.

### **GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING TARGETED PROGRAMS**

Researchers suggest some guidelines to assist educators and policymakers in developing programs for dropout prevention and recovery. Based on a review of processes commonly used to create programs for at-risk students, Smith (1991) offers six planning steps:

- “Identification of student population to be served
- Formation of a collaborative team
- Identification of program vision and goals
- Research into programs that have demonstrated success in working with the target population
- Development of proposal and implementation strategies, including the identification of potential supporters and sources of funding
- Evaluation of program outcomes: creation of an evaluation process aimed at measuring changes in selected student outcome measures to demonstrate the program’s effectiveness in working with its target population” (p. 45).

Smith also offers “positive features” found in effective programs that can guide planning:

- “A small-enough student population to allow individuals to feel that they are members of a supportive and personally meaningful school community
- A teacher culture that emphasizes the adoption of an extended role with students that includes counseling and mentoring as well as classroom instruction
- A daily or weekly schedule that permits teachers and students as well as teachers and teachers to support one another and participate in the governance of the school
- Grouping and scheduling practices that allow students to experience long-term rather than short-term relations with teachers

- Learning activities that demonstrate to students a clear link between what is taught in school and the skills needed in desirable workplaces
- Curriculum and instructional practices that are responsive to student concerns and interests
- Grading practices, including the scheduling of academic units, that are more sensitive to the characteristics of students who have not responded well to traditional classrooms
- Close monitoring of student behavior and academic performance in an effort to provide assistance rather than administer punishment
- Recognition and rewards for incremental signs of improvement
- Activities, including community service and peer tutoring, that allow students to know that they are needed
- Enough program autonomy from central office directives and policies to permit needed forms of experimentation
- Administrative practices that encourage teacher collaboration and accountability” (p. 71).

Conrath (cited in Lovitt, 2000) provides this set of suggestions for designing effective programs:

- “Make the program part of a systemwide, K through 12 strategy
- Identify which students will be best served by the program
- Clarify roles within the program
- Expect students to live up to high ethical and intellectual standards—do not assume students are lacking ability and do not insult by using derogatory labels or patronizing them
- Teach discipline and responsibility—do not confuse imposing obedience with teaching discipline
- Avoid treating student anonymously or impersonally
- Present an alternative strategy for learning—require students to do real schoolwork . . . to mature intellectually
- Locate the program in a place where students feel a sense of belonging
- Balance the program between fitting into the total school program and having enough autonomy to allow the kinds of decisions teachers must make in order to assist students who are at risk
- Make strong efforts to help discouraged students see the point of what they are being asked to do and how it will improve their lives” (p. 8).

The quality of staff is also an important consideration. Conrath notes that teachers who are effective in dropout prevention programs exemplify “toughness (ethical, emotional, and intellectual), compassion, professionalism, seriousness, knowledge, creativity, authoritativeness —through expertise and sense of competence, not constantly quoting rules—sense of purpose, and cultured competence” (p. 9-10).

Conrath further describes the students who may be candidates for these programs. They need:

- “Structure and predictability

- Flexible means and consistent ends: Provide different approaches (traditional ones have not worked)
- High ethical and intellectual expectations: Realize these students are discouraged; they are not dumb
- ‘Do-able’ academic work: Select work that provides intellectual challenges, without academic threats
- Contact with adults: Provide engagement with adults that students can trust and respect
- Adult leadership: Handle student confrontations with skill and compassion, not as ego threats or battles to be won
- Serious, useful schoolwork: Be sure students know the use of the work they are doing
- Trust: Do not assume these students have chosen failure; help them learn to break the pattern
- Increased self esteem: Provide opportunities for achievement in worthwhile endeavors” (p. 10-11).

The Kentucky Department of Education has developed a comprehensive resource guide as part of a statewide strategy to provide assistance to local schools and districts to address the dropout problem. Examples of standards and indicators aligned to the Kentucky school improvement standards are shown in Appendix B.

More information on effective dropout prevention and recovery programs is expected from the federal *What Works Clearinghouse*. OSPI produced a report for the legislature that describes promising programs and practices for dropout prevention (Shannon & Bylsma, 2005).

\* \* \* \* \*

Strategies for dropout prevention and recovery have been developed and implemented over the past forty years with some successes. Reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates require comprehensive efforts. As noted in the previous chapter, restructuring or comprehensive school improvement has the potential to change schools for all children. Increasing student engagement in their learning and strengthening the bonds that students have with their schools will improve the school experiences of all students. The problems of school failure and disengagement will be “solved as educators in specific schools come to accept their own accountability for the failure of a proportion of their students to acquire the skills required to make their way in the rapidly changing world adults have bequeathed to them” (Smith, 1991, p. 43).

Although there is not yet sufficient evidence on the effectiveness of many targeted programs for potential dropouts, many have elements that can make a difference for students. Continuing to provide targeted programs will be necessary along with comprehensive school improvement to meet the needs of all students who may struggle in the traditional contemporary school.

## CHAPTER 7

# CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Although dropout rates in American schools have declined dramatically since the early 1900s, current dropout rates have remained much the same over the past thirty years. Even low dropout rates represent thousands of young people who do not have the benefit of a full educational program to prepare them for their adult lives. The economic, political, and social realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century require that young people receive the best education possible. *No Child Left Behind* requires regular progress in achievement based on test scores. More important than test scores is for all students to have the knowledge and skills to be able to learn, live, and work in our world, both now and in the future. The preamble to the Washington educational reform law HB 1209 states that the goal of schools is “to provide students with the opportunity to become responsible citizens, to contribute to their own economic well-being and to that of their families and communities, and to enjoy productive and satisfying lives” (OSPI, 2003, p. 1).

Understanding the complexities related to dropouts is essential in order to modify existing school programs and to create effective programs and practices for increasing graduation rates and reducing dropout rates. This document begins with a brief description of the various ways to define dropout and the scope of the problem. Chapters 3 and 4 review the professional and research literature about student, family, community, and education-related factors that contribute to students’ leaving school early. These factors are closely related and often interact. Educators and policymakers need to understand the complexity of these root causes before they can design effective strategies and programs that have potential for changing schools to increase their “holding power.”

- The student, family, and community factors include those that are personal, economic, and sociocultural in nature.
- Education-related factors include school policies and procedures, school structure and class assignment, course content and instruction, and school climate and relationships.

Once the various contributing factors are understood, effective strategies for dropout prevention and recovery can be designed. The restructuring strategies discussed in this document include comprehensive school improvement, increasing student engagement and school membership, and improving instruction and curriculum. Many different dropout prevention and recovery programs are discussed, although the evidence of their effectiveness is less well documented.

Given the scope of the problem and the multitude of root causes, a combination of responses will be necessary to meet the various needs of students. Implementing the *Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools* and the strategies described in *Addressing the Achievement Gap* and in *The High Schools We Need* and making changes to ensure universal student engagement and school membership will require

resolve on the part of educators and policy makers. Targeted resources, extensive professional development, and involvement of the community at large will also be necessary. Taking these steps is critical to implementing the educational reform that will meet the goal of having all students learning the essential state standards and meeting the graduation requirements. The stakes are greater now for schools and districts with the federal *No Child Left Behind* accountability system.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Addressing the dropout problem requires a critical review of current classroom instructional practices, personal interactions with students, and educational policies and programs. In many cases, school and district staff will need to make modifications in these areas. In addition, greater support will be required from the community, the state, and policymakers—the problem is simply too pervasive and the causes too widespread for the education community to address the problem by itself. This final section discusses some specific suggestions that emerge from the body of research reviewed for this document.

### **School and District Policies and Procedures**

A number of policies and practices are associated with increased dropouts, and new strategies can be considered to reduce the likelihood that students will leave school before graduation. Examining school and district policies and practices is a necessary first step to reducing the negative impact they may have on at-risk students. The following topics and questions provide some suggestions for this process.

**Discipline and Attendance Rules** Schools and districts need to examine regulations and their implementation to be sure discipline policies are fair and respectful of individuals from diverse backgrounds. Do students understand the policies? What are the causes of suspensions and expulsions? Do “no tolerance” policies affect some groups of students more than others? Are discipline and attendance policies fairly and equitably applied? What alternatives are used to keep students in school while dealing with disciplinary and attendance issues?

**High Standards and Grading Practices** Schools and districts need to examine their learning targets, the supports that are in place to assist students in meeting them, and the practices for grading students. Are learning standards aligned with the state requirements? Are the standards well understood by students and families? Are sufficient supports in place to ensure students learn to high standards? Are grading practices fair, equitable, and consistent across courses and grade levels? Are there school patterns of course failures? Do teachers believe some students must fail in order to maintain academic standards?

**Retention** Schools and districts need to examine policies related to retaining students in grade. What are the opportunities that students have to learn? Do students have access to qualified teachers? Do students have appropriate instructional materials? What alternatives to retention are in place in a school?

**Special Education and Remediation Programs** Schools and districts need to review remediation and special education programs and services. Are students appropriately identified and provided needed services? Are students of color disproportionately assigned to remedial programs or certain special education categories? Do staff attitudes and behaviors reflect a belief that students can achieve the learning standards? Are students taught the state standards (essential academic learning requirements) and provided appropriate support to reach them? Do students receive the instruction they need so they can complete their programs and obtain a diploma?

**Transitions** Schools and districts need to collect and examine data regarding student progress during transitional periods, i.e., elementary to middle school, middle school to high school. Are assistance programs in place to help students meet the challenges of changing schools? Do counselors help students make choices about their school programs? Are adult advocates, mentors, or advisors responsible for assisting students with social and academic needs?

**Course Content and Instruction** Schools and districts need to examine their course offerings, the instructional methods used, and instructional materials. Are courses sufficiently rigorous? Are students expected to do quality work? Is content relevant? Do students have the opportunity to apply what they learn to “real world” situations? Is student work valued and displayed?

**School Climate and Relationships** Schools need to examine the learning environment and quality of relationships among students and teachers. Do students feel they belong? Do teachers know their students well? Are the relationships between students and teachers positive? Do teachers believe that students can learn? Are students respected and valued? Do students understand the importance of effort in achieving their goals?

**Evaluation of Alternative Programs and Practices** Schools and districts need to evaluate alternative programs and practices. Are students receiving the personal and academic support they need? Are programs stable? Do programs have sufficient resources and staff to be high quality? Are the programs evaluated to determine their effectiveness in reducing dropout and helping students receive a diploma? Are these alternative schools and programs considered high-status organizations?

### School Reform

**Implementing the Characteristics of Effective Schools** The professional and research literature on dropouts adds even more credence to the importance of implementing the characteristics of effective schools. If schools are to become positive communities of support and learning, they will need to be changed in many respects. Restructuring or comprehensive school improvement provides a plan and process for considering the questions noted above and making changes needed to improve schools for all students and for keeping potential dropouts in school.



**Closing the Achievement Gap** Implementing the strategies for closing the achievement gap also will help reduce student dropout. Many students who struggle academically, who are often students of color and in poverty, become dropouts. Students who drop out may be those who find schools uncomfortable and even hostile places and who may lack access to quality programs, teachers, or culturally responsive classrooms. Fundamental to closing the achievement gap and reducing dropout are the need to change beliefs and attitudes, build positive relationships, and create social capital for students.

**Involving Families and Community** The involvement of family and community is an important component in both the characteristics of effective schools and strategies for closing the achievement gap. The entire community has a responsibility for valuing young people, for mentoring them to increase social capital through relationships, and providing resources needed to create and expand targeted programs and activities for students. Schools and districts need to take the initiative in bridging school, family, and community because educators cannot solve the problem alone.

**Accommodating Personal Crises** Flexibility in the system is needed to accommodate individuals whose life circumstances may disrupt their educational careers. The current emphasis for on-time graduation may obscure the need some students have for taking time out to get their lives in order. The age-grade rigidity in American schools makes it difficult for students who face overwhelming life circumstances to leave and return to school without stigma. A provision for more fluid enrollment and attendance policies, while a major departure from current practice, bears consideration. Some educational experts have long called for a system that promotes continuous progress without the arbitrary age-grade link that now pervades U.S. schools.

**Gathering Accurate Data** To obtain accurate information regarding graduation and dropout rates, record keeping of school attendance, school completion, and student whereabouts will need to be improved. Better data collection will require the use of a state system for identifying and tracking students as they move within the system. In addition, school staff must receive appropriate training so that definitions are clearly understood and consistently applied. Moreover, accurate records must be maintained and the data carefully analyzed.

**Providing Sufficient Resources** When dropout rates fall significantly, budget and school facilities will be impacted. If all students were to continue through their senior year to graduation, classroom space, materials, teachers, and other resources would have to be increased to meet the growth in the number of students. Potentially class sizes could increase and enrollment in school buildings in some districts could be over capacity. This would be a “nice problem” and surely worth solving if the result would be larger numbers of students learning to high standards and graduating with a meaningful diploma and the knowledge and skills to meet the world’s challenges.

**Providing Effective Targeted Programs** Implementing targeted programs for dropout prevention and recovery will be necessary. Improving existing schools as an umbrella prevention measure is ideal. Even with significant changes in schools as

suggested above, some students will undoubtedly continue to decide to leave the regular school early or will be pushed out because of some grievous issue. Chapter 6 provides an overview of a continuum of programs and services from early intervention to adult high schools and continuing education. All of these approaches fill a need. These alternative schools and programs also must meet high standards, offer relevant and rigorous academic curriculum, and provide supportive and nurturing environments for students. Some students who have not returned to school are in need of opportunities to complete their education. An aggressive system for identifying and recruiting these students back into the educational system is necessary once effective programs are in place. Recruitment is both a local and a state responsibility.

**Providing Pertinent Professional Development** The changes inherent in the reform strategies discussed in this document require retooling and deepening the knowledge and skills of educators. Extensive professional development will be needed for addressing the dropout issue as well as addressing the achievement gap and improving learning for each student. Professional development should include information on the complexities of dropping out, students who are at risk, and the principles of learning and pedagogy needed to help diverse students learn the state standards. Educators also need to strengthen their beliefs in the value of each child and their own ability to teach each child.

#### State Support

The state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction has taken leadership in implementing some of the suggestions above. The *Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools* is the basis for considerable school improvement effort in the state. Assistance for school improvement and restructuring are occurring through partnerships with OSPI, educational service districts, school districts and other educational organizations. Identifying exemplary schools and providing opportunities for educators to share their successes and challenges are included in the state-wide institutes sponsored by OSPI. Continued support of these efforts will be required.

OSPI also has a role in supporting programs and schools targeted for dropout prevention and recovery. Expanding the work of educational reform to more directly encompass dropout prevention and recovery programs is an appropriate next step to increase visibility and to provide legitimacy to these programs. Providing information on successful programs, supporting evaluations of programs, increasing the status of alternative programs, and providing leadership in developing appropriate curriculum and teaching strategies are functions the agency may fill.

Thousands of individual students are represented in the impersonal statistics about those who drop out or graduate prepared for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, the twin goals of reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates are critical to schools, districts, the state, and the nation. We must find the required additional resources, commitment, and political “will” to help each student finish high school. There can be no “throw-away” children.

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A Comparison of High School Dropout Rates in 1982-1992  
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As Graduation Standards get Tougher High School Dropout Rate Rises, Economists Find  
<http://www.news.cornell.edu/releases/March00/hS.dropouts.req.ssl.html>

Dropouts in America: How severe is the problem? What do we know about intervention and prevention? Civil Rights Project at Harvard University  
[http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/dropouts\\_gen.php](http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/dropouts_gen.php)

Dropout Prevention/Alternative Programs. Educational Programs That Work 1995  
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/EPTW/eptw3/index.html>

Dropout Prevention Clearinghouse: Research, Reports, and Data (Texas)  
<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/dpchse/research.html>



Dropout Prevention Resource Guide (Kentucky)

<http://www.ihdi.uky.edu/dropout-prevention/>

Dropout Prevention Resource Guide for Counselors (Kentucky)

[http://www.kyca.org/member\\_services/KCA%20Dropout%20Prevention%20Resource%20Guide.pdf](http://www.kyca.org/member_services/KCA%20Dropout%20Prevention%20Resource%20Guide.pdf)

Grade School Dropouts with Nowhere to Go

<http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/06-01/0601main1.htm>

Middle School Attendance Improvement/Dropout Prevention

[http://www.sharingsuccess.org/code/e1/ms\\_ai.html](http://www.sharingsuccess.org/code/e1/ms_ai.html)

Middle School Education: The Critical Link in Dropout Prevention

<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9213/middle.htm>

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network

<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/>

Oregon Department of Education: Dropout Prevention and Recovery Resources

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=2>

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School Dropout Prevention: Information and Strategies for Educators

National Mental Health and Education Center

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Service Learning: Real Dropout Prevention

[http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/service\\_learn/service\\_over.htm](http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/service_learn/service_over.htm)

U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics. Public High School Dropouts and Completers from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2000-01 Statistical Analysis Report

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2004310>

U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics. Dropout Rates in the United States: 2001

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2005046>

## APPENDIX A

### ESTIMATED ON-TIME GRADUATION RATES

*No Child Left Behind* requires the use of the on-time graduation rate as an indicator for high school adequate yearly progress (AYP). Although some students who do not graduate “on-time” are actually still in school and should not be considered dropouts, this graduation rate provides insight into the scope of the dropout problem.

Researchers use different methods to estimate the on-time graduation rate of states and the nation as a whole. Some may include private schools or use different methods to determine the number of students who begin high school. These different methods result in different estimated rates. Table A-1 shows the results of three different estimates that have been recently reported for the nation and for Washington state, and a fourth estimate using data reported to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Although each method is slightly different and the estimates are for different years, they are quite similar to each other. In general, they estimate that the national on-time graduation rate is about 67-70 percent. In other words, about 2 of every 3 students who begin high school in grade 9 complete high school with a regular diploma four years later.

**Table A-1: Differences in Estimated On-Time Graduation Rates**

	Business Roundtable <sup>1</sup> (1999)	Urban Institute <sup>2</sup> (2000)	Manhattan Institute <sup>3</sup> (2001)	NCES CCD data <sup>4</sup> (2001)
National	71.3%	66.6%	70%	67.3%
Washington	73.0%	62.3%	66%	65.9%

<sup>1</sup> Graduation rates for private and public schools as a proportion of the 18-year old population, 1998-1999. *The Hidden Crisis in the High School Dropout Problems of Young Adults in the U.S.: Recent Trends in Overall School Dropout Rates and Gender Differences in Dropout Behavior*. Appendix E. The Business Roundtable. February 2003. <http://www.brtable.org/pdf/914.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) for Class of 2000, *Counting High School Graduates when Graduates Count: Measuring Graduation Rates under the High Stakes of NCLB*. Education Policy Center, The Urban Institute. February 2003. [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410641\\_NCLB.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410641_NCLB.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Based on estimated Fall 1997 grade 9 enrollment using an average of grades 8-10, adjusted for population growth, divided by the number of graduates in 2001. *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States*. Working Paper 3. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. September 2003. [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/ewp\\_03.pdf](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/ewp_03.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Rate based on Fall 1997 grade 9 enrollment divided by the number of graduates in 2001. Author’s analysis of Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics.

Table A-2 shows a state-by-state analysis of the NCES data from 1990 to 2001. Some states had large changes in their rates over this 11-year period. For example, six states had declines of 10 percentage points or more, while nine states increased their graduation rates. (Hawaii had the largest decrease and New Jersey had the largest increase.) More research needs to be conducted to determine why some states have higher graduation rates while others have seen their rates drop by a large margin. Some of the issues that should be investigated include:

- State policies that may encourage or discourage graduation and retention, including the effect of higher standards, more demanding graduation requirements, and high-stakes exit exams;
- Trends in transfers to and from private schools at the secondary level;
- How economic forces and mobility rates affect enrollment estimates over time and at different seasons of the year;<sup>8</sup>
- Changes in the definition of a graduate; and
- Differences in the quality of data reported by states over time.

**Table A-2: Public High School Graduation Rates, 1990 to 2001**

STATE	Class of 1990			Class of 2001			Rate Change, 1990-2001
	Est. Cohort Graduation Rate (%)	Fall 1986 Grade 9 Enrollment	1990 High School Graduates	Est. Cohort Graduation Rate (%)	Fall 1997 Grade 9 Enrollment	2001 High School Graduates	
Alabama	64.7	62,612	40,485	58.2	63,707	37,082	-6.5
Alaska	68.4	7,872	5,386	63.8	10,671	6,812	-4.6
Arizona	72.5	44,263	32,103	70.5	66,357	46,773	-2.0
Arkansas	76.7	34,501	26,475	73.2	37,038	27,100	-3.5
California	67.8	348,672	236,291	68.7	458,650	315,189	0.9
Colorado	74.1	44,478	32,967	69.3	56,644	39,241	-4.8
Connecticut	74.9	37,191	27,878	72.9	41,713	30,388	-2.0
Delaware	68.5	8,103	5,550	64.5	10,259	6,614	-4.0
Florida	61.1	145,470	88,934	54.6	203,561	111,112	-6.5
Georgia	62.7	90,274	56,605	51.4	121,511	62,499	-11.3
Hawaii	86.8	11,896	10,325	61.0	16,573	10,102	-25.8
Idaho	79.4	15,080	11,971	78.0	20,431	15,941	-1.4
Illinois	76.6	141,211	108,119	70.9	156,022	110,624	-5.7
Indiana	75.0	79,787	60,012	67.9	82,753	56,172	-7.1
Iowa	87.6	36,316	31,796	82.8	40,806	33,774	-4.8
Kansas	82.0	30,940	25,367	74.5	39,397	29,360	-7.5
Kentucky	69.1	55,038	38,005	64.2	57,537	36,957	-4.8
Louisiana	56.7	63,616	36,053	58.5	65,496	38,314	1.8
Maine	77.6	17,829	13,839	76.1	16,623	12,654	-1.5
Maryland	72.8	57,118	41,566	74.4	66,172	49,222	1.6

<sup>8</sup> A strong agricultural economy may bring more migrant workers to a state in the fall, which can inflate the grade 9 enrollment figure used in the denominator of the calculation. States with a high number of migrants who leave the state later in the year are "penalized" under this method.

Appendix A

STATE	Class of 1990			Class of 2001			Rate Change, 1990-2001
	Est. Cohort Graduation Rate (%)	Fall 1986 Grade 9 Enrollment	1990 High School Graduates	Est. Cohort Graduation Rate (%)	Fall 1997 Grade 9 Enrollment	2001 High School Graduates	
Massachusetts	77.0	70,205	55,941	75.3	72,256	54,393	-1.7
Michigan	70.1	133,290	93,807	74.7	129,251	96,515	4.6
Minnesota	89.8	54,693	49,087	82.3	68,770	56,581	-7.5
Mississippi	64.3	39,196	25,182	56.9	41,768	23,748	-7.4
Missouri	72.2	67,105	48,957	72.5	74,706	54,138	0.3
Montana	83.3	11,249	9,370	77.3	13,753	10,628	-6.0
Nebraska	85.5	20,650	17,664	80.0	24,559	19,658	-5.5
Nevada	77.2	12,273	9,477	68.6	22,037	15,127	-8.6
New Hampshire	74.0	14,547	10,766	75.3	16,336	12,294	1.3
New Jersey	79.8	87,477	69,824	88.3	86,192	76,130	8.5
New Mexico	68.2	21,820	14,884	61.0	29,843	18,199	-7.2
New York	65.1	220,033	143,318	57.8	245,320	141,884	-7.3
North Carolina	68.0	95,311	64,782	59.4	106,559	63,288	-8.6
North Dakota	88.1	8,733	7,690	84.0	10,053	8,445	-4.1
Ohio	74.0	154,659	114,513	70.9	156,861	111,281	-3.1
Oklahoma	77.5	45,930	35,606	73.4	51,060	37,458	-4.1
Oregon	71.7	35,552	25,473	66.2	45,211	29,939	-5.5
Pennsylvania	79.1	139,761	110,527	75.3	151,930	114,436	-3.8
Rhode Island	69.6	11,291	7,825	69.6	12,362	8,603	0.0
South Carolina	58.5	55,488	32,483	48.0	62,018	29,742	-10.5
South Dakota	85.7	8,929	7,650	71.9	12,352	8,881	-13.8
Tennessee	67.9	67,900	46,094	55.3	73,477	40,642	-12.6
Texas	64.1	269,256	172,480	61.9	347,951	215,316	-2.2
Utah	83.1	26,935	21,196	83.3	37,254	31,036	0.2
Vermont	82.3	6,685	6,127	77.7	8,827	6,856	-4.6
Virginia	73.6	82,294	60,605	74.8	88,374	66,067	1.2
Washington	77.2	59,514	45,941	65.9	83,616	55,081	-11.3
West Virginia	77.3	28,278	21,854	73.4	25,119	18,440	-3.9
Wisconsin	84.2	61,791	52,038	78.2	75,862	59,341	-6.0
Wyoming	78.6	7,411	5,823	72.9	8,332	6,071	-5.7
<b>Nation</b>	<b>71.2</b>	<b>3,250,523</b>	<b>2,316,711</b>	<b>67.3</b>	<b>3,818,843</b>	<b>2,568,956</b>	<b>-3.9</b>

Source: Author's analysis of data from "State Nonfiscal Data," Common Core of Data, NCES.

## APPENDIX B

# KENTUCKY DROPOUT PREVENTION STANDARDS AND INDICATORS

The Kentucky Department of Education has developed a comprehensive dropout prevention plan in response to legislation passed by its State General Assembly in 2000. A dropout prevention resource guide, updated in fall 2003, provides standards and indicators for categories of dropout prevention approaches linked to the Kentucky Department of Education Standards and Indicators for School Improvement. The resource guide also gives strategies for implementation, barriers to consider, and resources. The categories include Early Intervention, Basic Core Strategies, Making the Most of Instruction, School Culture, and Student Support/Engagement. Each is developed for primary/elementary school, middle school, and high school levels. Excerpts from the standards and indicators for selected categories at the high school level are listed below. The complete Resource Guide is available at <http://www.ihdi.uky.edu/dropout-prevention/listofarticles.asp>.

### **EARLY INTERVENTION – IDENTIFICATION – HIGH SCHOOL**

#### **Standard 2 – Academic Performance – Classroom Evaluation/Assessment**

- 2.1d Test scores are used to identify curriculum gaps.
- 2.1e Multiple assessments are specifically designed to provide meaningful feedback on student learning for instruction purposes.
- 2.1h Samples of student work are analyzed to inform instruction, revise curriculum and pedagogy, and obtain information on student progress.

#### **Standard 3 – Academic Performance – Instruction**

- 3.1a There is evidence that effective and varied instructional strategies are used in all classrooms.
- 3.1c Instructional strategies and activities are consistently monitored and aligned with the changing needs of a diverse student population to ensure various learning approaches and learning styles are addressed.

#### **Standard 4 – Learning Environment – School Culture**

- 4.1a There is leadership support for a safe, orderly, and equitable learning environment (e.g., culture audits/school opinion surveys).
- 4.1i Multiple communication strategies and contexts are used for the dissemination of information to all stakeholders.
- 4.1k This school-district provides support for the physical, cultural, socio-economic, and intellectual needs of all students, which reflect a commitment to equity and an appreciation of diversity.

#### **Standard 5 – Learning Environment – Student, Family and Community Support**

- 5.1a Families and the community are active partners in the educational process and work together with the school/district staff to promote programs and services for all students.

- 5.1b Structures are in place to ensure that all students have access to all the curriculum (e.g., school guidance . . .).
- 5.1d Students are provided with a variety of opportunities to receive additional assistance to support their learning, beyond the initial classroom instruction.

**Standard 7 – Leadership**

- 7.1e Leadership ensures all instruction staff has access to curriculum related materials and the training necessary to use curriculum and data resources relating to the learning goals for Kentucky public schools.
- 7.1h The school/district leadership provides the organizational policy and resources infrastructure necessary for the implementation and maintenance of a safe and effective learning environment.

**Standard 8 – Organizational Structure and Resources**

- 8.1a There is evidence that the school is organized to maximize use of all available resources to support high student and staff performance.
- 8.1d There is evidence that the staff makes efficient use of instructional time to maximize student learning.
- 8.1e Staff promotes team planning vertically and horizontally across content areas and grade configurations that is focused on the goals, objectives, and strategies in the improvement plan (e.g., common planning time for content area teachers; emphasis on learning time and not seat time, and integrated units).
- 8.2d State and Federal program resources are allocated and integrated (Safe Schools, Title I, IDEA . . .) to address student needs identified by the school/district.

**ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLING – HIGH SCHOOL**

**Standard 1 -- Academic Performance – Curriculum**

- 1.1a There is evidence that the curriculum is aligned with Academic Expectations, Core Content for Assessment, Transformations, and the Program of Studies.
- 1.1c The district initiates and facilitates discussions between schools in the schools in the district in order to eliminate unnecessary overlaps and close gaps.
- 1.1e The school curriculum provides specific links to continuing education, life, and career options.
- 1.1g The curriculum provides access to a common academic core for all students

**Standard 2 – Academic Performance – Assessment**

- 2.1a Classroom assessments of student learning are frequent, rigorous and aligned with Kentucky’s core content.
- 2.1b Teachers collaborate in the design of authentic assessment tasks aligned with core content subject matter.
- 2.1e Multiple assessments are specifically designed to provide meaningful feedback on student learning for instructional purposes.
- 2.1f Performance standards are clearly communicated, evident in classrooms and observable in student work.

**Standard 3 – Academic Performance – Instruction**

- 3.1a There is evidence that effective and varied instructional strategies are used in all classrooms.
- 3.1c Instructional strategies and activities are consistently monitored and aligned with the changing needs of a diverse student population to ensure various learning approaches and learning styles are addressed.
- 3.1e There is evidence that teachers incorporate the use of technology in their classroom.
- 4.1g Teachers examine and discuss student work collaboratively and use this information to inform their practice.

**Standard 4 – Learning Environment – School Culture**

- 4.1a There is leadership support for a safe, orderly, and equitable learning environment (e.g., culture audits/school opinion surveys).
- 4.1c Teachers hold high expectations for all students academically and behaviorally, and this is evidenced in their practice.
- 4.1g Teachers communicate regularly with families about individual students' progress (e.g., engage through conversation).
- 4.1h There is evidence that the teachers and staff care about students and inspire their best efforts.
- 4.1i Multiple communication strategies and contexts are used for the dissemination of information to all stakeholders.

**Standard 5 – Learning Environment -- Student, Family, Community Support**

- 5.1a Families and the community are active partners in the educational process and work together with the school/district staff to promote programs and services for all students.
- 5.1c School/district provides organizational structures and supports instructional practices to reduce barriers to learning.

**Standard 6 – Professional Development**

- 6.1e Professional development in on-going and job-embedded.

**Standard 7 – Leadership**

- 7.1a Leadership has developed and sustained a shared vision.
- 7.1d There is evidence that the school/district leadership team disaggregates data for use in meeting the needs of a diverse population, communicates the information to school staff and incorporates the data systematically into the school's plan.
- 7.1e Leadership ensures all instructional staff has access to curriculum related materials and the training necessary to use curricular and data resources relating to the learning goals for Kentucky public schools.
- 7.1f Leadership ensures that time is protected and allocated to focus on curricular and instructional issues.

**Standard 8 – Organizational Structure and Resources**

- 8.1a There is evidence that the school is organized to maximize the use of all available resources to support high student and staff performance.
- 8.1d There is evidence that staff makes efficient use of instructional time to maximize student learning.

## **CATEGORIES OF STANDARDS AND INDICATORS**

The complete list of categories is shown below. The first three categories are topics suggested by the National Dropout Prevention Network. The same sub-categories are developed for each level (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school) although they are listed once here for brevity.

### **Early Intervention**

- Elementary School, Middle School, and High School
  - Identification
  - Family Involvement
  - Reading and Writing
  - Attendance/Truancy

### **Basic Core Strategies**

- Elementary School, Middle School, and High School
  - Mentoring/Tutoring
  - Service Learning
  - Alternative Programming
  - Out-of-School Enhancements

### **Making the Most of Instruction**

- Elementary School, Middle School, and High School
  - Learning Styles and Multiple Intelligence
  - Differentiated Instruction
  - Instructional Technology
  - Career Education

### **School Culture**

- Elementary School, Middle School, and High School
  - Safe Schools
  - Equitable Learning Environment
  - Welcoming School Environment
  - Character Education

### **Student Support/Engagement**

- Elementary School, Middle School, and High School
  - Co-Curricular/Extra-Curricular
  - Support Programs
  - Transition