

A blurred, high-angle photograph of a busy city street. Pedestrians are walking away from the camera, their figures softened by motion blur. The background shows multi-story buildings and a clear sky. A horizontal line runs across the middle of the image, separating the header from the main content.

Transforming Dropout Prevention Policy and Practice

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Overview of the Dropout Problem¹

- Risk factors for dropout include poverty, low achievement, teen parenting, urban location, gender (male), and race/ethnicity (minorities).
- In the 2005-06 school year, only 73.4% of high school students graduated on time.
- Each year, more than 600,000 high school students drop out of school. They will earn more than \$260,000 less during their lifetimes than peers with high school diplomas.
- Half of all dropouts are concentrated in just 12% of America's high schools.

School dropout in the United States has been called a "crisis,"² an "epidemic,"³ and even a "catastrophe."⁴ Regardless of its description, school dropout is a widespread and serious problem in the United States, with enormous consequences for students who choose its path. Without a diploma, dropouts face increasingly bleak career prospects tied largely to entry-level employment. They also may remain far behind in a technology-driven age where career adaptability is not simply a plus, but a requirement. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, a high school dropout earns an average of \$9,000 less per year than a high school graduate. This difference translates into an earnings loss of \$260,000 over a lifetime for the more than half a million young people who drop out of high school each year.⁵

Dropouts cost the public an estimated \$24 billion each year in crime, food stamps, housing assistance, and TANF benefits.
—Thorstensen, 2005

Many factors contribute to students dropping out of school, including poverty, low literacy and achievement levels, parenting responsibilities, and the need to earn money through employment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), only 73.4% of high school students graduated on time in the 2005-06 school year.⁶ Moreover, in 2003, only 55% of African-American students and 53% of Hispanic students graduated from high school.⁷ Graduation rates for females are higher than for males, and rates for White and Asian/Pacific Islander students are higher than for African American, Latino, and Native American students.⁸

Three-quarters of state prison inmates are dropouts.
—Harlow, 2003

Dropout is a problem faced by nearly every school in the United States, though it is concentrated enough to warrant targeted interventions. Half of all dropouts and two-thirds of minority-student dropouts are concentrated in just 12% of America's high schools. Moreover, only one of every five high school students attends a school with an exemplary graduation rate, defined as a school with a completion rate above 90%.⁹ Unfortunately, despite an expansion of government resources on K-12 education, dropout rates have changed little during the past 15 years.

Recent Actions by the Federal Government to Address the Dropout Problem

- Recent Federal efforts have been focused on standardizing measures of dropout and graduation, which traditionally have differed from state to state.
- By 2013, every high school in the United States will be required to report new graduation rates based on a standardized formula.
- This field is ripe for direction and support from the Federal Government.

Recent Federal efforts related to dropout prevention have been concentrated on measuring the extent of the problem; but because different states measure dropouts differently, it has been nearly impossible to quantify. For example, some states report on the number of students who drop out in a given year; others report the



percentage of students who drop out over the period from ninth to 12th grade. To complicate matters, some schools report students as dropouts only if their administrations receive official notification from those students regarding their decision.

The Federal definitions of dropout and graduation have helped to unify and guide State and local organizations in their efforts to measure the extent of the dropout problem. By 2003, 30 states had adopted the NCES dropout definition in their own legislation, with an additional 10 states adopting longitudinal systems similar to those mandated by the new No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation.¹⁰

In October 2008, Former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced new regulations for the reauthorization of NCLB that establish a standardized graduation rate measuring how many incoming freshmen in a particular high school graduate within four years.¹¹ By 2013, every high school in the U.S. will be required to report new graduation rates based on this formula. Moreover, the NCES has recently established the definition of a dropout as an individual enrolled in school the previous year who did not return at the start of the current school year and who has not graduated from high school, transferred to another public or private school, been temporarily absent due to suspension or illness, or died.

While these Federal and State efforts are important preliminary steps, most dropout prevention to date has occurred at the local level. Private foundations, state agencies, and universities have historically established and funded dropout prevention interventions. This trend is reflected in the programs that have been reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), which was established in 2002 as a central and trusted source of scientific evidence for what works in education.¹² Of the 24 interventions reviewed under the Dropout Prevention topic area, only four programs were developed or funded by the Federal Government. Only two of these programs are currently in operation: JobCorps and Talent Search.

Other programs developed by the Federal Government to reduce high school dropout include three of the six TRIO outreach programs: Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Upward Bound Math-Science. The Federal Government established these educational opportunity programs to motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in middle school through post baccalaureate programs. Preliminary research on Upward Bound indicates that students in the program are four times more likely to earn an undergraduate degree than non-participating students from similar backgrounds.¹³

Policy Recommendations

- Support programs that use multiple concurrent strategies for dropout prevention.
- Support the creation of a National Clearinghouse on Dropout Prevention to serve as a central resource for information about best practices.
- Implement dropout prevention strategies before secondary education, and provide early warning systems to identify students at the highest risk of dropping out.
- Fund research on types of dropouts and pathways to dropping out.

The following recommendations stem from ICF's extensive experience in conducting dropout prevention research, our reviews of the research, and our in-depth work with practitioners to address this problem. There are many different types of dropouts in many different settings, and even within a given setting, students bring to the table



different problems and family situations that need to be addressed. Our recommendations can be distilled down to one salient point: *there is no “magic bullet” when it comes to dropout prevention.*

From a policy perspective—and from a practical perspective—we cannot recommend a single program or strategy for dropout prevention. Since dropout prevention programs are largely driven locally, it would not be prudent to advocate the wholesale adoption of a given model at the national level; rather, it is necessary to deconstruct what makes dropout prevention programs “tick” and ensure that key elements of success are in place.

A recent review of dropout prevention research conducted by ICF International and the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network identified the common strategies of successful dropout prevention programs.¹⁴ These strategies include:

- **School-community collaboration:** Recognize the value of local entities outside of the school, and bring services into the school that will help students learn. Before learning can begin, basic needs must be met (e.g., a student may need eyeglasses to see the blackboard). Schools are rarely equipped to meet these needs.
- **Safe learning environments:** Students must feel safe in the school environment; otherwise, they simply may not go to school. Introducing a comprehensive violence prevention plan will help students concentrate on learning.
- **Family engagement:** Engage families as collaborative partners with schools to improve students’ academic performance.
- **Mentoring/tutoring:** Help students foster caring, trusting relationships with participating adults. In the era of high-stakes testing, guidance counselors may no longer have the time to concentrate on students’ social needs.
- **Alternative schooling:** Provide students with the opportunity to achieve success based on their own personal goals and achievements.
- **Active learning:** Employ teaching strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process.
- **Career and technology education:** Integrate academic and career-based skills, providing a solid foundation for future success.

“Over their lifetimes, dropouts from the class of 2007 alone will cost our nation more than 300 billion dollars in lost wages, lost taxes and lost productivity... Increasing graduation rates by just five percent, for male students alone, would save us nearly eight billion dollars each year in crime-related costs.”
—Former U.S. Secretary of Education
Margaret Spellings

Programs implementing several of the strategies noted above were found to be more effective at keeping students in school than programs that were more specific. Given that students are likely to drop out for a multitude of reasons and risk factors—from teen pregnancy, boredom, academic difficulties, and homelessness, to the need to financially support their families—a multifaceted approach to dropout prevention is crucial.

Overall, our review indicated that dropout prevention programs are reporting successes in various settings and with different populations. Across all programs and populations, dropout prevention efforts were most successful in helping students complete a GED certification and in reducing dropout rates; however, most dropout prevention programs had difficulty increasing high school graduation rates. From a policy standpoint, decision-makers must first decide which goal takes precedence: keeping kids in school or getting them through high school graduation. If it is the former, many programs have been proven to be effective; if it is the latter, program options are currently limited.



ICF International recommends the following policy changes in the dropout prevention arena.

- 1. Establish a National Clearinghouse on Dropout Prevention:** Since dropout prevention is largely a local endeavor, it is imperative that the Federal Government provide some forums for the sharing of best practices. The WWC review of dropout prevention programs was a solid first step; however, this effort focused mainly on the evaluation of research on specific programs, not the identification of best practices. Practitioners need to have information at their disposal that includes qualitative evidence of program effectiveness from the “front lines,” cost of implementation, feasibility, and training requirements. This national clearinghouse could also support and encourage more research on dropout prevention.
- 2. Focus More Heavily on Elementary and Middle School Programs:** More attention must be given to dropout prevention efforts before students reach secondary education. By the time students enter high school, they are often exhibiting the most critical risk factors for dropping out of school. By focusing on elementary and middle school students (in addition to high school), dropout prevention programs can reach students at a critical time in their development. Middle school, especially, is the last best chance to impact behavior changes and establish a strong foundation for future academic achievement. It also is important to take a long-term view of dropout because these early interventions may not show impacts for years (i.e., until students finish high school). Given the enormous externalities that arise from a student’s decision to drop out (e.g., lost tax revenue, increased crime rates, higher health care costs, etc.), it is best to think of early intervention as a long-term investment.
- 3. Implement Early Warning Systems:** Widespread efforts are underway on the development of early warning systems for dropout prevention. These early warning systems are typically computer-based programs that identify the confluence of risk factors that would make some students more likely to drop out than others. By identifying the students most at-risk for dropping out, there is a better chance of not only reaching them early, but also delivering the most appropriate services to ensure they stay in school.
- 4. Conduct Research on Typologies of Dropouts and Pathways to Dropping Out of School:** Dropout prevention is a complicated endeavor. There are many types of dropouts, and it stands to reason that each type of dropout will require a tailored mix of services to ensure that he or she stays in school. Efforts must acknowledge and address the different pathways to dropping out of school (e.g., financial need to support family, pregnancy, academic failure, etc.).

Ultimately, dropping out is a process, not an event. By identifying students early and mitigating the risk factors that oftentimes precipitate decisions to drop out, we can do at-risk students—and our nation—a great service.

What ICF Has to Offer

ICF International has extensive experience in the conduct of dropout prevention research, as well as in helping policymakers distill research into meaningful findings for policy and practice. Some of our relevant projects in this area include:

- Communities In Schools National Evaluation:** ICF is in the fourth year of a five-year evaluation of Communities In Schools (CIS), the nation’s largest dropout prevention program. This evaluation includes a number of components, including the development of a typology of sites, a school-level quasi-experimental study, a comparative study of the structure and operations of other national nonprofits, and three randomized controlled trials in Jacksonville, FL, Austin, TX, and Wichita, KS. Further information on this evaluation can be found on CIS’s Web site at <http://www.cisnet.org/about/NationalEvaluation/Normal.asp>.



- **Best Practices in Dropout Prevention Study:** ICF recently completed a study of Best Practices in Dropout Prevention for the State of Texas. A copy of the final report was widely distributed to policymakers and practitioners, and can be found on the Texas Education Agency's Web site at http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/comm/leg_reports/bpdp_finalreport_20081219_toTEA.pdf.
- **Evaluation of the Texas Education Agency's High School Success Pilot Programs:** ICF is currently conducting research for the State of Texas on several of its dropout prevention programs: the Collaborative Dropout Reduction Program, the Math Instructional Coaches Program, and the Intensive Summer Programs.
- **Evaluation of Communities In Schools of Texas:** ICF recently completed a school-level and student-level evaluation of Communities In Schools of Texas, which operates 27 local programs and provides services to more than 600 schools. The final report can be found on the Texas Education Agency's Web site at http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/opge/progeval/DropoutPrevention/CIS_of_Texas_Final_Evaluation_2008.pdf.
- **What Works Clearinghouse:** The What Works Clearinghouse is an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education to provide a central and trusted resource for "what works" in education. ICF provided leadership roles on the What Works Clearinghouse review of dropout prevention programs, and contributed significantly to the development of this topic area.
- **Evaluation of Georgia's Performance Learning Centers®:** ICF recently completed an evaluation of Performance Learning Centers (PLCs), which are non-traditional learning environments for high school students who are not succeeding in traditional schools. The study, sponsored by Communities In Schools of Georgia, included a quasi-experimental study, two case studies, a survey of all PLCs, and a component to identify future directions in program evaluation.

In areas such as dropout prevention, where students experience multiple challenges and multiple pathways to dropping out of school, innovative research is needed to understand both the complexities behind—and solutions to—the problem. ICF is a leader in mixed-methods research, which brings together both quantitative and qualitative data to address complex social issues. ICF understands the nuances behind these issues, and also that research is only valuable if the results can be put into action by policymakers and practitioners.

About the Authors

This paper was written by Allan Porowski, Felix Fernandez, Sarah Decker, Kelle Basta, and Julie Gdula of ICF International. Mr. Porowski, a fellow at ICF, has worked extensively in dropout prevention and substance abuse prevention for at-risk youth. He served in leadership roles on all of the projects listed in the previous section. Dr. Fernandez, a senior associate at ICF, serves as a study manager for two randomized controlled trials for the Communities In Schools National Evaluation, and also served as Principal Investigator of the Georgia PLC evaluation. Ms. Decker, a senior associate at ICF, was the case study manager for the Communities In Schools National Evaluation and is currently a qualitative analyst for the Texas Education Agency's Collaborative Dropout Reduction Pilot Program. Ms. Basta, an analyst at ICF, was a key contributor to the Communities In Schools National Evaluation, the What Works Clearinghouse, and the Georgia PLC Evaluation. Ms. Gdula, a research assistant at ICF, has participated in several evaluations of dropout prevention programs, including the Communities In Schools National Evaluation, the Evaluation of Georgia's Performance Learning Centers, and the Evaluation of Communities In Schools of Texas. The authors benefited from the input of staff across ICF who perform work in support of dropout prevention programs and other programs serving at-risk youth. The views expressed in this paper and any errors are those of the authors and not necessarily those of ICF International.



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About ICF International

ICF International (NASDAQ: ICFI) partners with government and commercial clients to deliver consulting services and technology solutions in the energy, climate change, environment, transportation, social programs, health, defense, and emergency management markets. The firm combines passion for its work with industry expertise and innovative analytics to produce compelling results throughout the entire program life cycle, from analysis and design through implementation and improvement. Since 1969, ICF has been serving government at all levels, major corporations, and multilateral institutions. More than 3,500 employees serve these clients worldwide. ICF's Web site is www.icfi.com.



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