Research Brief
Dropout Rate

Questions:

What strategies are successful for helping to reduce the dropout rate?
Especially, how does raising standards for all students impact the dropout rate?

Summary of Findings:

There is no one 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 that respond to their individual circumstances and needs. Programs, to be effective, need to provide one-on-one intensive attention to at-risk students, who often must be convinced that they are competent and can be successful in school. The curriculum should include basic educational skills, social skills, and experiential education. In addition, the interrelated causes and multiple problems associated with dropping out call for comprehensive communitywide, multi-service approaches and multi-component programs

"Reducing the Dropout Rate" (http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/9/c017.html) developed by E. Gregory Woods at the North West Regional Educational Laboratory briefly reviews the educational policies and practices whose effectiveness or ineffectiveness in reducing the dropout rate have been shown. These policies and practices include the following:

Elements of Successful Programs

√   The way in which a school or program is set up and administered has been found to impact retention of at-risk students and the dropout rate.

√   A climate characterized by safety and orderliness in a location that is accessible and nonthreatening can make a powerful contribution to dropout prevention.

√   A common thread that runs through successful dropout prevention programming is that it is student centered. No one structure or set of activities works for all students. A variety of strategies in various combinations should be used to address the entire range of student needs or factors that alienate them from school.

√   Curricular components related to dropout reduction include a mix of academic instruction and experiential learning, concentrated reading and writing activities, basic skills remediation, test-taking skills, self-esteem building, social skills training, and parenting skills, and learning content with real-world application has been shown to enhance students' interest and involvement.

√   In successful programs staff members are committed to program success and hold high expectations

for student academic achievement and behavior. Caring adults deal with the "whole child," showing interest and concern. A climate of collegiality exists among staff and extends to engendering a sense of belonging in children and their families.

Ineffective Practices

Research that has yielded information on effective dropout prevention practices has also produced findings about ineffective practices. Unfortunately, these practices can still be found. Ineffective practices identified include:

√ State-mandated promotion policies. If standards and requirements are raised without support for school improvement and without personal attention to the varied populations of high-risk students and their specific learning requirements, the effect will be to push more young people out of school.

√ Ability grouping. Students' self-concepts suffer as a result of labeling them average or below. Placement in lower ability groups is associated with lower teacher expectations and reduced learning.

√ Early intervention without follow-up.

√ Basic skills teaching by itself.

√ Work experiences and on-the-job training with no other interventions. There is need for some kind of individual attention or mentoring as well.

√ Grafting additional staff and programs onto existing ineffective structures, e.g., extending the school day or adding more courses.

√ Increasing the number of attendance officers to cut down on truancy.

Other Factors from the Research Impacting Dropout Rate

√ Quality of teachers hired: dropout rates tend to be higher where faculties include a greater percentage of minimally educated teachers or teachers with little experience.

√ Schools with effective programs for assisting at-risk youth had two things in common: the school culture functioned as both a positive, supportive community and a "high-reliability" organization.

√ A large evaluation of federally funded dropout prevention programs suggests that alternative middle schools for younger students and GED programs for older students are promising.

√ Dropping out is not the end of a student's education (many return either to complete their degree or to earn a GED), and more research should be directed toward returning dropouts.

Special Note: It would seem that there is little evidence to suggest that raising academic standards for students will lead to a reduction in the dropout rate. In particular, when higher standards are implemented without other school improvement efforts, or when those standards become high stakes, the research suggests that they will increase the dropout rate. On the other hand, high expectations for all are important—separate

programs for at-risk youth can communicate reduced expectations for academic performance. All in all, if a school were to implement higher academic standards and they did result in reducing the dropout rate, it might be inferred from the research that it was because of the other support programs put into place along side the dropout rate: positive school climate, non-threatening environment, tutoring and mentoring, increased experiential learning, etc.

Online Resources:

Reducing the Dropout Rate
THE article on dropout prevention (if you don't go anywhere else, go here): Definition of the problem, review of the literature (what works and what doesn't), specific programs that work.
E. Gregory Woods, North West Regional Educational Laboratory
http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/9/c017.html

Staffing Up and Dropping Out: Unintended Consequences of High Demand for Teachers
Growing public school enrollment and the need to maintain or improve service to students has increased the demand for teachers, perhaps more rapidly than existing sources can accommodate. While some schools recruit well qualified teachers by offering higher salaries or better working conditions, others may satisfy their need for staff by relaxing hiring standards or assigning novice teachers to difficult classrooms. Schools' hiring policies have consequences for student success. Dropout rates tend to be higher where faculties include a greater percentage of minimally educated teachers or teachers with little experience. The relationship between dropout rate and teacher qualifications is independent of student poverty, school size, and location. A proposed strategy to reduce dropout rates is to encourage higher preparation and employment standards, and to provide appropriate classroom assignments, mentoring, and support for new teachers.
Mark Fetler
Education Policy Analysis Archives, Volume 5 Number 16, July 29, 1997
http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v5n16.html

Factors Influencing GED and Diploma Attainment of High School Dropouts
This study examined correlates of degree attainment in high school dropouts. Participants were high school dropouts of Mexican American or non-Latino white descent who had no degree, a high school degree, or a GED certificate. It was estimated that 59.2% of dropouts return to obtain high school credentials. School capability, age at dropout, and socio-economic status significantly predicted degree attainment. Presence of children, higher school capability and socio-economic status were associated with GED attainment, while later grade at dropout was associated with diploma attainment. These relationships did not vary by ethnicity, although degree attainment was less likely for Mexican American dropouts. The

study concludes that dropping out is not the end of a student's education, and more research should be directed toward returning dropouts. Further, the focus of such research should be expanded to include a more positive and broader range of correlates.

Jeffrey C. Wayman, Colorado State University
Education Policy Analysis Archives, Volume 9 Number 4, February 8, 2001
http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v9n4/

How Can We Help? What We Have Learned from Recent Federal Dropout Prevention Evaluations.

Implementation and impact findings from a large evaluation of federally funded dropout prevention programs suggest that alternative middle schools for younger students and GED programs for older

students are promising. Striving to understand the nature of academic, social, and personal problems affecting students and tailoring services to address these problems may be a useful systemic approach to dropout reduction.

Dynarski, Mark; Gleason, Philip
Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk v7 n1 p43-69 2002
http://www.leaonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/S15327671ESPR0701_4

Dropout Reporting and NCLB Compliance in U.S. Schools

This page examines articles and studies that explore the often-murky area of how the states count and report students who drop out of school. Since these statistics can relate to how performance is measured and can have potential impact on school funding, this is a policy area undergoing scrutiny by state and federal education officials alike.

National Council of State Legislatures
http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/countdropout.htm

Date: 1/11/2004 Submitted By: Mike Muir, Maine Center for Meaningful Engaged Learning

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http://www.educationpartnerships.org/