

TRENDS AND OUTCOMES
AMONG A NINTH-GRADE COHORT,
1993-94 THROUGH 1997-98

AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT
OFFICE OF PROGRAM EVALUATON

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LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

There are several important points to keep in mind as you read this report:

- This study concerns outcomes for only a single, closed cohort, or class, of first-time ninth-grade students between the 1993-94 and 1997-98 school years. Students who enrolled in the district after October 1993 were not added to the cohort. Numbers and percentages mentioned in this report refer only to this single group of students and therefore should not be interpreted as applying to all secondary students in the district during the period covered in the study.
- Dropout numbers that are reported for this cohort of students are based on students who left the district and were assigned a school leaver code which, at that time, identified them as dropouts. These numbers are not reconciled through the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) statewide PEIMS dropout recovery process. After leaving AISD, many of these students may have enrolled in another school district. These students would have been removed later from the district's annual dropout count by TEA.
- The dropout and school leaver numbers reported for this cohort should be considered in terms of *events*, not in terms of *students*. For instance, it is possible that a student may have enrolled and dropped out more than once during the period of the study. It is also possible that a student may have enrolled, dropped out, re-enrolled, and even graduated.

STATE POLICIES REGARDING DROPOUTS

In recent months, district and state dropout rates have come under increased scrutiny. The state focus has shifted from annual dropout percentages to focusing on longitudinal dropout rates for cohorts of beginning ninth graders as well. Because of the recent focus on dropouts at both the state and local levels, the Office of Program Evaluation was asked to conduct a study examining dropout rates for a cohort of first-time ninth graders.

RECENT LEGISLATION

In 1984, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 72 as its package of educational reform. The bill mandated that the state dropout rate be reduced (Texas Education Agency, 1985). Additionally, in 1984, the 70th Texas State Legislature directed the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to report biennially on current dropout rates of students in Grades 7-12 and to project cross-sectional and longitudinal dropout rates for students in the state.

More recently, in 1995, the 74th Texas State Legislature passed Senate Bill 1, which effectively rewrote the state's education code. Prior to that, during the 1993-94 school year, the Texas Education Agency implemented a standard accountability system for all school campuses, the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS). AEIS assesses the quality of learning at schools by comparing campus performance to state-established standards. Dropout rates are one of the indicators used for assigning ratings to districts and campuses.

In the quest for an accurate account of the number of dropouts in the state, the definition of dropouts has been standardized and modified over the years. In 1989, a school dropout was defined by TEA as any individual, in grades 7 through 12, who:

- did not hold a high school diploma or its equivalent;
- was absent for 30 or more consecutive days from the school in which the student is enrolled; and
- whose attendance within that period at another public or private school could not be verified (TEA, 1989).

Presently, after the end of each school year, districts report prior year dropout information to the state through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). According to the current definition, a student in grades 7-12 is identified as a dropout if he or she: (1) is absent without an approved excuse or documented transfer and does not return to school by the fall of the following year, or (2) completes the school year but fails to re-enroll the following school year (TEA, 1998b). Students in the following categories are also identified as dropouts:

- students who enter the military before graduation;
- students from special education, upgraded, or alternative education programs who leave school;
- students who leave school and enter a program not qualifying as an elementary/secondary school (e.g., cosmetology school); and
- students enrolled as migrants and whose whereabouts are unknown.

Unlike the former definition, the current definition lists situations which exclude students from the dropout count. Currently, students in the following categories are not included in the dropout count:

- students who die;
- students who drop out as defined above, before seventh grade;
- students who are out of school for temporary periods with an approved excuse;
- students showing regular attendance at a state-approved alternative program;
- students enrolled as migrants who subsequently have a school enrollment record;
- students known to have transferred to another public school, adult or alternative education program, or home schooling;
- students who move to another grade level;
- students who enroll in college early;
- students transferred or assigned to another public institution or state-approved educational program; and
- foreign students who return to their home country.

CALCULATION OF DROPOUT RATES

In March of 1991, following the legislative mandate to reduce the dropout rate, TEA released its first plan to reduce the state dropout rate. Since the plan's publication and implementation, the number of students leaving the state educational system before graduation has steadily declined. Between 1987 and 1997, according to TEA, the overall number of dropouts reported in Texas has decreased from more than 91,000 to slightly under 26,000, representing a 70.1% decrease. Presently, the state's dropout rate is calculated as the number of

dropouts summed across all grades 7-12 divided by the number of students summed across all grades 7-12:

$$\text{DropoutRate} = \frac{\text{number of students who dropped out during the school year}}{\text{number of students who were in membership at any time during the school year.}}$$

It should be noted that a cumulative count of students is used in the denominator as well as the numerator. A student who enrolls on several campuses during a school year is counted in attendance at each campus he or she attends. However, when dropout information is aggregated, such students are counted only once. It should also be noted that although this rate is less comparable to the dropout rates calculated for the 1992-93 school year, this calculation more accurately reflects the dropout situation and provides more uniform data for comparison among districts and campuses (Texas Education Agency, 1998a).

DROPOUT RECOVERY PROCESS AND SCHOOL LEAVER CODES

In 1990-91, TEA initiated a process of dropout recovery as a way to determine the state's dropout rate more accurately. The recovery process involves the implementation of an automated statewide search which matches district dropout data against statewide enrollment. In this way, students who are reported as dropouts by one district but are found to be enrolled elsewhere in the state are not counted as dropouts. Since its inception, the methodology for recovering dropouts has been expanded to include more students, thus reducing the state's dropout rate with each subsequent year. During the 1998-99 school year, TEA began utilizing school leaver codes for every student who withdraws from a campus. These codes provide districts and the state with more specific information regarding the reasons that students leave school than was recorded previously. Appendix A contains the complete chronology of TEA dropout definitions and methodological changes related to the dropout recovery process. Appendix B lists the school leaver codes in effect for those students enrolled in the district in 1997-98 who did not return in 1998-99.

SUMMARY

Over the past decade, a number of changes have been implemented in order to improve the accuracy of the state's dropout numbers. The dropout definition has been modified in order to include students who truly dropped out but were not included in the count, and to exclude students erroneously included in the dropout count. The state has also implemented a system by which dropouts are recovered once their enrollment in another school district or state-approved educational program has been verified. The combination of these efforts has led to a more realistic picture of dropout rates and reporting.

STUDY METHODS

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to determine annual and longitudinal dropout rates for a cohort of first-time ninth graders. Ninth graders were the focus of this study because the ninth-grade year can pose significant academic difficulties for many students. It is the transitional year from middle school, and, for most students, the first time they are required to earn credits toward high school graduation and for promotion to the next grade. According to the 1994-95 State Report on Public School Dropouts, the largest number of dropouts and the largest dropout rate are found at the ninth grade (Texas Education Agency, 1996).

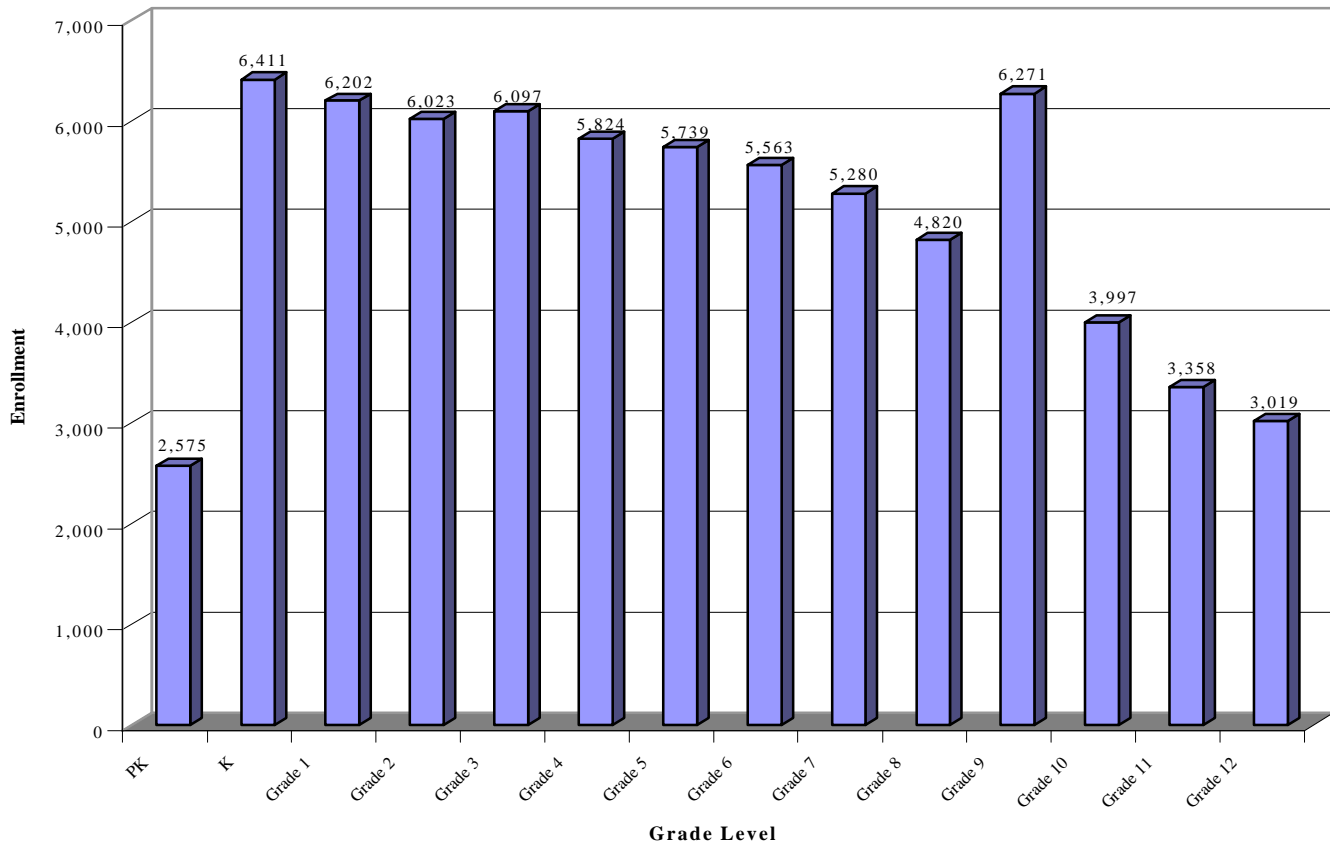
SCOPE OF THE STUDY

In 1993-94, ninth-grade students constituted 8.8% of the student body in AISD. Other than kindergarten enrollment, there were more students enrolled in ninth grade (6,271) than in any other grade level that year, and 56% more students enrolled in ninth grade than in tenth grade (3,997). This phenomenon is partly attributable to the “washback effect,” the result of ninth graders being retained when they fail to earn the five credits necessary to be classified as tenth graders. Of the 6,271 students in the ninth grade in 1993-94, at least 1,393 (22%, or slightly more than one in five) were identified as having repeated ninth grade one or more times. Figure 1 shows student enrollment by grade level for the 1993-94 school year and gives some idea of the scope of the problem.

In this study, a group of students who entered ninth grade for the first time during the 1993-94 school year were tracked for four subsequent school years. The group was identified from the district’s submission of Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data as of the last week of October, 1993. Students who transferred into the District subsequent to the October 1993 PEIMS snapshot date were not included in the study. Students who had been enrolled as ninth graders during the previous school year, the products of the “washback effect,” were eliminated, yielding a cohort of 4,881 first-time ninth graders.

For each of four subsequent school years (1994-95 to 1997-98), students were sorted into one of four categories: 1) still enrolled in AISD, 2) graduate, 3) dropout, or 4) other school leaver. Students identified as still enrolled were sub-categorized by grade level in order to demonstrate retention rates. Because data were taken from the District’s October PEIMS data submission, the data reported represent student enrollment status as a snapshot in time. These data are submitted cumulatively over a 12-month cycle to the state education agency. Because the recovery process is not completed until April, TEA reports statewide dropout rates in arrears. That is, dropout data for any given school year are not calculated or reported until the following school year (e.g., dropout data for the 1993-94 school year were reported in October, 1994). Dropouts are reported for each school year according to state school leaver codes. The dropout numbers reported here are numbers submitted by the district and have not been reconciled through the PEIMS recovery process. After each year’s dropout recovery process is complete, district dropout data were not corrected within AISD’s local student databases.

Figure 1: District Enrollment by Grade Level, 1993-94



CHANGING DROPOUT DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In 1990-91, TEA began a systematic, statewide effort to “recover” dropouts. In its dropout recovery process, TEA reconciles districts’ dropout data with statewide enrollment data in order to determine whether students who are reported as dropouts in one district are enrolled in another school district or another institution in the state. This matching allows such students to be recovered, that is, removed from dropout counts. TEA expanded its dropout recovery process twice during the study period, first in 1994-95 and again in 1995-96. These expansions resulted in some students who previously would have been included in the dropout count being counted as recovered and not included in the count. For example, prior to the 1994-95 school year, students who failed the exit-level TAAS but met all other graduation requirements were considered dropouts. From that time forward, however, such students were not included in dropout counts. As a result of these changes, the categories of school leavers who are counted as dropouts are not consistent throughout the study period. That is, more students were counted as recovered dropouts and therefore not included in dropout counts in 1994-95 than in 1993-94. Likewise, more students were counted as recovered in 1995-96 and subsequent years than were counted as recovered in 1993-94 and 1994-95. It should be noted, however, that these changes were made at

the state education agency level and were applied to all districts within the state. Dropout rates have declined statewide as a result of these changes in the dropout recovery process.

METHODOLOGY

Using PEIMS submission data from the October 1993 snapshot date, 6,274 students were identified as enrolled ninth graders in the Fall 1993 semester. Of this group, 1,393 students (22.2%) were identified as repeaters; that is, they had been enrolled as ninth graders in at least one previous school year. The repeaters were eliminated from the cohort, leaving a cohort of 4,881 first-time ninth graders.

Once the cohort was identified, enrollment data were extracted from district files that had been submitted for PEIMS in October of each year (1994-95 to 1997-98). Using both PEIMS identification numbers and local student identification numbers, the cohort was matched year-to-year with the following files:

- The PEIMS submission file (to determine enrollment);
- The DROP file, a file of unreconciled dropouts as submitted for PEIMS;
- The TRAN file, a file maintained by campuses, containing leaver code assignments; and,
- The GRAD file, a mainframe file containing an annual listing of graduating students.

Files were first created containing all students in the appropriate grades for each school year in the study (see Table 1). These files were then matched with the cohort file to determine whether students were still enrolled in AISD or had left school. Data for students still enrolled in AISD were sorted by grade and summarized, yielding totals by grade level. The cohort file was matched with district dropout and graduate files for each year. In order to identify school leavers, the cohort was matched with the TRAN file. Students who were determined to be school leavers [by having a withdrawal date in the TRAN file] were sorted by leaver codes and categorized as either “dropouts” or “other leavers.” Finally, the school leavers identified as dropouts were matched with the DROP file to determine if the data matched. As noted in the introduction, TEA’s dropout recovery criteria were expanded twice during the period covered in this study, resulting in fewer leaver categories being included in the dropout count and thus fewer students being reported as dropouts.

Table 1: Years and Grade Levels Included in the Study

Year	Grade Level
1993-94 (Year 1)	9 (original cohort)
1994-95 (Year 2)	9, 10
1995-96 (Year 3)	9, 10, 11
1996-97 (Year 4)	9, 10, 11, 12
1997-98 (Year 5)	9, 10, 11, 12

All student data were extracted from PEIMS files.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Results of the study are presented annually for each year of the study period and then cumulatively for the five-year study period. All percentages shown in this section are based on the 4,881 first-time ninth-graders in the cohort, not on the entire 7-12 grade student population.

ANNUAL RESULTS

As reviewed previously, (using PEIMS submission data from the October 1993 snapshot date) 6,274 students were identified as enrolled ninth graders in the Fall 1993 semester. Of this group, 1,393 students (22.2%) were identified as repeaters--that is, they had been enrolled as ninth graders in at least one previous school year--leaving a cohort of 4,881 first-time ninth graders. Table 2 summarizes enrollment and leaver data for the cohort group during the five-year period of the study.

Table 2: Enrollment and Leaver Data for the Cohort Group,
1993-94 through 1997-98

Year	Enrolled in AISD*				School Leavers†		
	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Graduates	Other Leavers	Dropouts‡
1993-94 (Year 1)	4,881				1	510	659
1994-95 (Year 2)	960	2,902			5	307	389
1995-96 (Year 3)	299	591	2,409		108	502	148
1996-97 (Year 4)	62	193	436	2,137	2,050	375	152
1997-98 (Year 5)	10	35	116	236	223	138	100
Cumulative Totals					2,387	1,832	1,448

*Grade enrollment figures as of PEIMS October snapshot date.

† School leaver occurrences for calendar year from October to September.

‡ Note that a student may be counted as a dropout more than once during the study period. Therefore, the numbers in this table should be regarded as "events" rather than "students."

1993-94

In the course of Year One (1993-94), one student (<1% of the cohort) graduated in mid-year through an alternative diploma program. Between August, 1993 and October, 1994, 932 school leaving events were reported. Of this number, 422 leaver codes translated to indicate dropouts and 510 translated to indicate other than dropouts. In October 1994, only 237 students in this cohort were submitted to PEIMS as dropouts, using the definition then in effect. However, according to our analysis, there were no matches among the student identification numbers of the group of submitted dropouts and the group of leavers among the cohort indicating dropouts. It appears that the dropout numbers for that year were substantially underreported for this cohort. Therefore, the actual number of dropout events for the cohort for this period of time appears to have been 659 [237 + 422]. (See Table 2, row 1).

1994-95

In October 1994 (Year Two), of the original cohort of first-time ninth graders, 3,862 (79.1%) were still enrolled in AISD schools. Of this number, 2,902 (59.4%) were enrolled as tenth graders, and 960 (19.6%) were retained in ninth grade. It should be noted that subtracting the number of school leavers for Year One from the number in the original cohort (4,881 – 1,170) yields a number (3,711) less than the number still enrolled in Year Two (3,862). This discrepancy is due to the static nature of enrollment data compared to the dynamic nature of school leaver data; e.g., a student may be counted as enrolled in October and reported as a school leaver later in the same school year. Furthermore, a student who leaves the district for reasons other than graduation may re-enroll in the district at a later date. Both of these instances would result in the student's being counted more than once in the cohort period. It may be more useful to consider school leavers in terms of events rather than persons because an individual student may have enrolled, left, and re-enrolled multiple times, with each instance being counted, during this study period.

By the end of Year Two, five more students had graduated, raising the cumulative number of graduates to six (<1%). Between October 1994 and October 1995, 551 school leaving events were reported. Of that number, 244 translated to indicate dropouts and 307 translated to indicate other than dropouts. However, of this cohort, only 173 students were actually reported as dropouts through PEIMS that year. Only 28 matches occurred between student identification numbers of the group of submitted dropouts and the group of leavers indicating dropouts. Therefore, it again appears that dropout numbers for this cohort were underreported in the PEIMS submission that year by 216 students [(173 + 244) – 28 = 389]. (See Table 2, row 2).

1995-96

In October 1995 (Year Three), of the original cohort of first-time ninth graders, 3,299 (67.5%) were still enrolled in AISD schools: 2,409 (49.3%) were enrolled as eleventh graders, 591 (12.1%) were retained as tenth graders, and 299 (6.1%) were retained again as ninth graders. Again, the number of students still enrolled in Year Three was greater than the number of students still enrolled in Year Two minus the number of school leavers in Year Two.

By the end of Year Three, an additional 108 students (2.2%) were reported as having graduated, bringing the cumulative count of graduates in the cohort to 114 (2.3%). Between

October 1994 and October 1995, an additional 549 school leaving events were reported. Of this number, 47 leavers codes translated to indicate dropouts and 502 translated to indicate other than dropouts. In the PEIMS submission that year, 101 students within this cohort were reported as dropouts. Our analysis determined that there were no matches between the students identification numbers of the group assigned school leaver codes and the group of PEIMS-reported dropouts. Therefore, it appears that dropouts again were underreported within this cohort [$47 + 101 = 148$]. (See Table 2, row 3).

1996-97

In October 1996 (Year Four), of the original cohort of first-time ninth graders, 2,828 (57.9%) were still enrolled in AISD schools: 2,137 (43.7%) were enrolled as twelfth graders, 436 (8.9%) were retained as eleventh graders, 193 (3.9%) were retained as tenth graders, and 62 (1.2%) were still retained as ninth graders. As seen in previous years, the number of students still enrolled in Year Four exceeded the number of students still enrolled in Year Three less the number of leavers in Year Three.

By the end of Year Four, an additional 2,050 students (41.9%) were reported as having graduated (2,164, or 44.3%, cumulatively, graduated early or on time). Between October 1995 and October 1996, 412 school leaving events were reported. Of this number, 37 leaver codes translated to indicate dropouts and 375 translated to indicate other than dropouts. In the PEIMS submission, 124 students in the cohort were reported as dropouts. Our analysis found only 9 matches between student identification numbers of the group of submitted dropouts and group of leavers indicating dropouts. As in previous years, it appears that dropouts were underreported within this cohort [$(37 + 124) - 9 = 152$]. (See Table 2, row 4).

1997-98

In October 1997 (Year Five), of the original cohort of first-time ninth graders, 397 (8.1%) were still enrolled in AISD schools: 236 (4.8%) were enrolled as twelfth graders, 116 (2.3%) were retained as eleventh graders, 35 (<1%) were retained as tenth graders, and 10 (<1%) were still retained as ninth graders. As in all previous years of the study period, the number of students still enrolled exceeded the number of students still enrolled the previous year minus the previous year's school leavers.

By the end of Year Five, 223 more students (4.5%) were reported as having graduated, bringing the cumulative number of graduates to 2,387 (48.9%). Between October 1997 and October 1998, an additional 147 school leaving events were reported. Of those, 9 leaver codes translated to indicate dropouts and 138 translated to indicate other than dropouts. In the PEIMS submission, 91 students in the cohort were reported as dropouts. No matches were found among the student identification numbers of the group of submitted dropouts and the group of leavers indicating dropouts. Therefore, the actual number of dropout events for Year Five appears to have been 100 [$9 + 91$]. (See Table 2, row 5). Over the five-year study period, there were a total of 1,448 dropout events for the cohort. (See Table 2, cumulative total).

CUMULATIVE RESULTS

At the end of five years (the conclusion of the 1997-98 school year, as reported in October 1998) the cohort students could be grouped according to one of four categories: graduates, those still enrolled in AISD, dropouts, or other school leavers.

GRADUATES

Of the original cohort, 2,164 (44.3%) students graduated either on time (either Spring or Summer 1997 graduation) or on an accelerated schedule. By the end of the 1997-98 school year (as reported in October 1998), an additional 223 (4.5%) students had graduated, raising the total number of graduates to 2,387 (48.9%).

DROPOUTS

According to the data submitted for PEIMS, 689 students in the cohort were reported as dropouts during this period (1993-1998), which would reflect a longitudinal dropout rate of 14%. However, after comparing PEIMS dropout submissions with all school leavers, it appears that for each year of the study dropouts were underreported. By our analysis, as many as 1,448 dropout events occurred for the cohort during the study period.

The total number of school leaving events over the study period was greater than the number of student in the original cohort. Therefore, some students in the cohort had multiple school leaving events during the study period. Additionally, the number of students still enrolled during each year of the study period was greater than expected based on the number of students enrolled each prior year and the number of school leaving events which occurred between years. Furthermore, as stated previously, the cohort students were matched with unreconciled dropout data files. That is, recovered dropouts (those excluded from the final dropout count by TEA) were not removed from these subsets.

STILL ENROLLED IN AISD

At the end of five years, 397 (8.1%) of the cohort re-enrolled in the district the following semester (Fall, 1997).

OTHER SCHOOL LEAVERS

Throughout the course of the study, 1,832 (37.5%) students in the cohort were determined to have left the district for reasons other than graduation or dropping out (see Table 3). Again, as with the cumulative dropout total, students may be counted as school leavers more than once during this period.

Table 3: Other School Leavers by TEA Leaver Code,
1993-98

Leaver Code	Translation	Number
03	Student died while enrolled in school or during the summer break after completing the prior school year	2
07	Student withdrew from school with declared intent to enroll in another public or private school outside Texas	236
16*	Student withdrew from/left school with documentation of having returned to home country, but with no evidence of enrollment in school in home country	41
19*	Student failed exit TAAS, but has met all other graduation requirements	1
22**	Student withdrew from/left school, in compliance with compulsory attendance laws (TEC Sections 25.085-25.086), to enroll in an alternative program (GED, JTPA, HEP, trade school, drug rehabilitation program, etc.) with documentation that he or she is working towards the completion of a high school diploma or GED certificate	593
23	Student withdrew from/left school to enroll in an alternative program (GED, JTPA, HEP, trade school, drug rehabilitation program, etc.) but student is not in compliance with compulsory attendance laws and/or with no evidence of working towards the completion of a high school diploma or GED certificate	0
24**	Student withdrew from/left school to enter college with documentation that he or she is working towards an Associate's or Bachelor's degree	10
28	Student withdrew from school with declared intent to enroll in another Texas public school district	787
29	Student withdrew from school with declared intent to enroll in a private school in Texas	95
60	Student withdrew at request of student, parent, guardian, or other person with legal control of the student for home schooling	43
61	Student was incarcerated in a facility outside the boundaries of the district	21
66	Student was placed in the district by Child Protective Services (CPS), subsequently removed by CPS, and the district has not been informed of the students' current status or enrollment	3
TOTAL		1,832

*In 1994-95, the dropout recovery process was expanded to include these codes. That is, students with these leaver codes are not included in the dropout count.

** In 1995-96, the dropout recovery process was expanded to include these codes. That is, students with these leaver codes are not included in the dropout count.

DISCUSSION

While compiling this report, problems with the current student data system and student accounting procedures that may lead to inaccuracies in dropout reporting were discovered. These problems will be discussed in this section.

In the course of conducting the cohort study, a number of opportunities for data errors were identified. As stated previously, between 1993 and 1998, the state implemented several significant changes in the ways in which dropout rates were calculated. In addition to state-level changes, the district has implemented procedural changes for student accounting. The apparent errors found in the course of conducting the cohort study that resulted in the under-reporting of dropouts are attributable to the following difficulties encountered in the course of the study.

DATA HOUSED IN MULTIPLE FILES

Multiple files must be consulted in order to prepare school leaver data for PEIMS submission (DROP, GRAD, TRAN, STUD). The PEIMS programmer must sort and match data from these files in order to capture all school leavers. Because data are pulled from multiple files and these files are maintained by different individuals, the probability of error is increased.

DUPLICATION OF EFFORT

When a student withdraws from a campus, school personnel complete a SR-291 form documenting the withdrawal. When utilized correctly, the form should indicate the school from which the student is withdrawing, the withdrawal date, the student's destination, reason for withdrawal, leaver code, and grade level. This information is then entered into the transcript (TRAN) file by campus staff. Originally, the TRAN file was intended to contain transcript request data. That is, when schools in other districts requested transcripts for AISD students, that information was entered in the TRAN file. Over time, however, the TRAN file began to be used as a file to store transfer and withdrawal data. It contains fields for withdrawal reason(s) and the city and state to which a student transferred. The TRAN file is used primarily between campuses, and is not monitored or maintained by the Office of Student Services. Student enrollment and withdrawal data, including withdrawal codes, are kept in the district's student master (STUD) file. Central office staff maintain this file. Completed withdrawal (SR-291) forms are sent to central office from the campuses so that withdrawal information can be entered into the STUD file. With campus personnel entering withdrawal data in one file and central office personnel entering it in another, in years past it was possible for withdrawal data on the TRAN file and the STUD file to be mismatched. Furthermore, there is not a process in place for Student Services to enter withdrawal (SR-291) forms and notify campuses of the entry.

CHANGES IN WITHDRAWAL/LEAVER CODES

AISD began using locally developed withdrawal codes before such coding was required by TEA. Local withdrawal codes were entered into the TRAN file while state dropout/leaver codes were submitted to TEA for PEIMS. AISD local withdrawal codes and state dropout/leaver codes did not match. As a result, the district's student data files had to be converted from local codes to state codes. Conversions were made in the TRAN file for multiple years. In the student

master (STUD) file, conversions were only made for 1996-97 and 1997-98 school years. The conversion of thousands of students' withdrawal records provided another opportunity for errors to be made.

USE OF LOCAL ID NUMBERS

While state PEIMS numbers are the accepted identifier for all students in the state, AISD continues to use local identification numbers rather than PEIMS numbers as student identification numbers. Additionally, the PEIMS number is most often the same as a student's Social Security number; therefore, the status of students who leave the district can be tracked more easily by using this identifier. However, in the process of tracking students for the cohort study, more students were found using local ID numbers than by using PEIMS numbers.

WITHDRAWALS TO ALC

During the study period, the procedure for removing students to the district's discipline alternative education program, the Alternative Learning Center (ALC), was changed. During the 1993-94 and 1994-95 school years, students were withdrawn from their home campuses when they were removed to the ALC, then re-enrolled upon their return. Beginning in the 1995-96 school year, students removed to the ALC were not withdrawn from their home schools but were coded with a "Z" in the district data system. Students remained enrolled at their home campuses, and home campuses remained accountable for their TAAS scores, attendance, and dropout status. For the years in which students were formally withdrawn when removed to ALC, a number of students in the cohort, once withdrawn to the ALC, could not be located again.

MISSING DOCUMENTATION

Documentation of enrollment and/or withdrawal could not be located for some students in the cohort. Records of enrollment (SR-290 forms) and withdrawal (SR-291 forms) from previous school years are stored on microfilm; original paper copies are then destroyed. In some instances, location of documentation was made difficult by documents not being photographed for microfilm in alphabetical order.

DELETED STUDENT RECORDS

In the process of conducting the study, it was discovered that, in some instances, student records were deleted from district data files when these students withdrew. Therefore, leaver records of these students were lost.

FAILURE TO WITHDRAW "NO SHOW" STUDENTS

When students are enrolled one school year but fail to attend the following year, they are referred to as "No Show" students. Sometimes these "No Show" students are not withdrawn from the roster of the campus. While the district does not receive ADA dollars when these students do not attend, because they are not withdrawn from the rolls of the campuses, they may not be included in the dropout count.

SCHOOL LEAVER CODES AS A MOVING TARGET

School districts have been required to submit dropout/exit reason or school leaver codes since the 1990-91 school year. Since this data submission was first required, a number of changes have been made to the codes and their definitions. In fact, changes were made to codes for four of the five years of the cohort study period. Although it is the responsibility of school districts to become familiar with changes in reporting procedures and data standards, the frequently-changing nature of school leaver codes has made the task of accurate reporting more difficult and has presented almost-yearly opportunities for errors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations, if implemented, may reduce the likelihood of future errors in dropout reporting.

SYSTEMS

The following systems were identified as needing further examination and improvement.

MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS AUDIT

An audit of the district's student data system should be conducted to determine the extent to which difficulties in accounting for school leavers is attributable to the complicated and inefficient nature of the present file structure.

STREAMLINING OF DATA FILES

Currently, student data files are structured such that student information is housed in multiple, often-unrelated files. When changes are necessary, they must be made in all files containing the field to be changed, or accuracy is compromised. A file structure utilizing a relational database would better serve the district's needs. A relational database allows for data to be stored in appropriate files and for files to be linked to one another. Data can then be shared among related files. The relational file structure eliminates the need for multiple data entry in multiple files and reduces the resultant opportunities for error. For example, student identification information (name, date of birth, gender, ethnicity, address, etc.) could be housed in a student master file. Files specific to other types of data (TAAS, grade reporting, school leavers, attendance, etc.) could be linked to the student master file. With this type of structure, student identification data (housed in the student master file) could be "shared" with the other files. Again, this eliminates the need for duplication of data entry and the errors which can result from it. Because data would be stored in related files, historical analyses such as this one could be more easily and more accurately conducted.

USE OF PEIMS IDENTIFICATION NUMBERS FOR STUDENT IDENTIFICATION

Presently, school districts are required to submit data for PEIMS according to students' PEIMS identification numbers. Austin ISD's student data file structure, however, remains based on local student identification numbers. Since local identification numbers have no meaning outside the district, the task of tracking students once they leave the district is made more difficult. If possible, local identification numbers should be used only temporarily until PEIMS identification numbers can be assigned by TEA or obtained if previously issued. Although the transition from local ID numbers to PEIMS ID numbers would be difficult at first, the long-term benefits of being able to more easily track students outside of the district would merit the initial effort.

POLICIES

Implementation of the following policies would improve campus and district efforts to prevent students from dropping out of school.

DROPOUT PREVENTION AS A PART OF EACH CAMPUS IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Since dropout rates are a part of campus accountability ratings, a dropout prevention plan should be included in each campus improvement plan.

REFINE POLICIES REGARDING CAMPUS RESPONSE TO EXCESSIVE ABSENCES

In the past, it was the district's policy to drop students who had been absent for 30 or more consecutive school days. This policy was in effect when dropouts were defined as any student who had been absent for that amount of time. Presently, parents are sent an attendance warning letter after a student has been absent for three consecutive days without documentation of a reason for the absence. After a student has been absent for an excessive period of time, school officials are expected to investigate the student's whereabouts. Much like the policies surrounding dropout reporting, policies regarding students with excessive absences have been changed on a frequent basis. Policies regarding students who are excessively absent from school should be reviewed.

PROCEDURES

The following procedures, if implemented, may reduce the likelihood of repeated data reporting errors and would give the district a more accurate assessment of its true dropout rate.

TRAINING

All new registrars and attendance clerks should receive mandatory training in proper procedures for documenting school leavers. These staff persons are often the last school personnel with whom parents have contact prior to leaving the district. Obtaining all necessary information regarding leaving students' future whereabouts is crucial to accurate school leaver reporting. Once obtained, this information must be accurately documented so that students are not counted as dropouts in error.

ESTABLISH PROCEDURES FOR COMMUNICATING CHANGES IN TEA DATA REPORTING REQUIREMENTS TO CAMPUS PERSONNEL

Because the history of dropout reporting has been characterized by frequent change, it is imperative that the district establish procedures for communicating changes in reporting requirements to campus personnel.

QUALITY CONTROL MEASURES

Random samples of school leaver data submitted by the campuses should be checked periodically to ensure that current leaver codes are being used and that the "99 unknown" leaver code is not being used excessively.

WITHDRAWAL (DROPPING) OF “NO SHOW “ STUDENTS

Recently, the procedures for dropping “No Show” students were more clearly defined to align with information needed for PEIMS reporting. This study determined that, in some instances, during the study period, campuses failed to drop students who were “No Shows” at the beginning of a new semester. Although maintaining these students on the attendance rolls decreased campuses’ average daily attendance, it also served to exclude them from campus dropout counts. The district must have an accurate picture of the actual number of dropouts if it is to provide sufficient and appropriate programs to address their academic needs.

NOTIFICATION OF PARENTS WHEN STUDENT IS WITHDRAWN

Procedures should be established for parental notification once a student has been withdrawn for non-attendance. It is conceivable that parents could be unaware that their child has not been attending school, and parental notification of the student’s being withdrawn could aid in recovering the student. It is also possible that parental notification of “No Show” students being dropped could yield information regarding transfers to other districts.

PERIODIC NOTIFICATION OF CAMPUSES

In previous years, dropout lists were sent to campuses at the end of each six-week grading period. Since timely notification is key to successful dropout tracking and recovery, the policy of periodic campus notification of dropouts should be re-instituted. In January 1999, campuses began receiving lists of student withdrawals at the end of each month. Visiting Teachers and School Support Community Specialists also receive a copy of these lists. These support personnel are instructed to review the lists for accuracy and to ensure that appropriate school leaver documentation exists. Campuses, with assistance from school support personnel, are responsible for following up on students who have dropped out.

IMPROVED COMMUNICATION REGARDING STUDENT WITHDRAWALS

A system of communication needs to be developed regarding student withdrawals. Requests for student records from other districts indicate that the student has enrolled in another school. Those who receive such requests must inform the campus staff person responsible for data entry as well as the Office of Student Services so that the appropriate school leaver code can be recorded. Recently, the District’s attendance accounting handbook was revised to outline in more precise language procedures for withdrawing students. These handbooks were distributed to all campuses.

SUMMARY

Over the past 15 years, policies regarding dropout reporting in Texas have undergone frequent change. The state education agency has moved from calculating dropout rates directly from school district reports to implementing a statewide dropout recovery process whereby dropout data are compared to enrollment data to prevent the inclusion of non-dropouts in its calculation of dropout rates. Additionally, the dropout recovery process has been modified nearly every year that it has been in existence. With dropout rates as a major component of the state's accountability system, reduction in dropout rates and increased accuracy in dropout reporting have become of paramount importance in Austin ISD and throughout the state.

The ninth-grade cohort study revealed a number of problems related to dropout reporting. Underreporting of dropouts during each year of the study period resulted in higher-than-expected longitudinal dropout rates for the cohort. Procedural problems related to documenting school leavers and structural problems within an outdated student data system contributed to the underreporting. Additionally, the district at times has failed to keep pace with the frequently-changing requirements in dropout reporting. The district's student data system is based on old computer software technology and has not been updated to reflect recent technological advancements. As a result, this system is a source of error. Updating the present system to reflect current technologies is necessary to resolve reporting problems and to prevent them from being replicated.

The recommendations presented here address only data collection and reporting of dropouts. Comprehensive dropout prevention encompasses accurate reporting as well as prevention and intervention programs which address the academic need of students at risk of dropping out of school. Although this report reveals significant problems in student retention and data management, it also serves as a springboard for future data collection and improved dropout reporting. With current problems and their likely causes identified, the district can move forward with a strategic plan for addressing the dropout problem at both the programmatic and reporting levels.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: A CHRONOLOGY OF TEA DROPOUT DATA DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL CHANGES

1987-88 through 1989-90	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98
Collection of dropout data begins	Dropout recovery process initiated	No change in methods from 1990-91	Methodology changed. Cumulative enrollment use for the denominator, rather than fall enrollment. (Calculation of estimated longitudinal dropout rate did not change.)	No change in basic methods from 1992-93.	No change in basic methods from 1993-94.	No change in basic methods from 1994-95.	No change in basic methods from 1995-96.	Data source will change: Data submitted Fall, 1998 will reflect first-time use of the school leaver codes. These are to be submitted for all students enrolled in 1996-97 who graduated, dropped out, or otherwise did not return to each district. Thus, more "Leaver Reason Codes" exist than did "Exit Reason Codes," to help account for students withdrawing for home schooling, with intent to enroll in private school, etc.
For the first three years, number of dropouts is computed directly from school district reports	Automated statewide search conducted to determine if any students reported as dropouts were enrolled in other school districts in the state		Dropout recovery process expanded to include students who earned GEDs; graduated within last year; were expelled for criminal behavior and incarcerated; or were previously identified as dropouts. ¹		Dropout recovery process expanded to include students who met all graduation requirements but failed exit-level TAAS; or withdrew to return to home countries.	Dropout recovery process expanded to include students who were attending approved alternative programs; or withdrew to attend college. ²		
	Of 58,417 dropouts reported by school districts, 4,452 (7.62%) were removed through the dropout recovery process.	Of 58,503 dropouts reported by school districts, 4,839 (8.27%) were removed through the dropout recovery process.	Of 51,719 dropouts reported by school districts, 8,317 (16.08%) were removed through the dropout recovery process.	Of 49,662 dropouts reported by school districts, 9,451 (19.03%) were removed through the dropout recovery process.	Of 40,882 dropouts reported by school districts, 10,964 (26.82%) were removed through the dropout recovery process.	Of 45,052 dropouts reported by school districts, 15,845 (35.17%) were removed through the dropout recovery process.	Of 43,068 dropouts reported by school districts, 16,167 (37.5%) were removed through the dropout recovery process.	Recovery processing is expected to parallel that which has been used to date.

The initial dropout recovery system was based on availability of data. The expanded recovery process also incorporated policy decisions related to use of the dropout rate as a performance indicator. For example, a student is counted as a dropout only once, even if the student drops out repeatedly, to assure that districts and campuses with aggressive dropout recovery programs are not penalized.

In 1995-96, districts were required for the first time to report as part of the dropout data submission students who withdrew from school to attend approved alternative education programs or to attend college. Although these students are reported, they are removed through the dropout recovery process for accountability purposes. Therefore, this change, while inflating the number of recovered dropouts, did not impact the dropout rate.

APPENDIX B: 1997-98 TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY SCHOOL LEAVER CODES

Code	Translation
01*	Student graduated
02	Student withdrew from/left school to pursue a job
03*	Student died while enrolled in school or during the summer break after completing the prior school year
04	Student withdrew from/left school to join the military
05*	Student withdrew from/left school with no declared intent to enroll elsewhere, but the district has received acceptable documentation of enrollment in another school district or private school in Texas
06*	Student withdrew from/left school with no declared intent to enroll elsewhere, but the district has received acceptable documentation of enrollment in another school district or private school outside Texas
07*	Student withdrew from school with declared intent to enroll in another public or private school outside Texas
08	Student withdrew from/left school because of pregnancy
09	Student withdrew from/left school to marry
10	Student withdrew from/left school due to alcohol or other drug abuse problems
11	Student withdrew from/left school because of low or failing grades
12	Student withdrew from/left school because of poor attendance
13	Student withdrew from/left school because of language problems
14	Student withdrew from/left school because of age
15	Student withdrew from/left school due to homelessness or non-permanent residency
16*	Student withdrew from/left school with documentation of having returned to home country, but with no evidence of enrollment in school in home country
17*	Student was expelled for behavior qualifying as Class C misdemeanor or worse (Code of Criminal Procedure), the behavior occurred on school property or at school-related functions, and appropriate actions resulted in placement in an alternative setting or the offense was reported to the appropriate law enforcement
19*	Student failed exit TAAS, but has met all other graduation requirements
21*	Student officially transferred to another Texas public school district through completion of ACC-041B
22*	Student withdrew from/left school, in compliance with compulsory attendance laws (TEC Sections 25.085-25.086), to enroll in an alternative program (GED, JTPA, HEP, trade school, drug rehabilitation program, etc.) with documentation that he or she is working towards the completion of a high school diploma or GED certificate

Code	Translation
23	Student withdrew from/left school to enroll in an alternative program (GED, JTPA, HEP, trade school, drug rehabilitation program, etc.) but student is not in compliance with compulsory attendance laws and/or with no evidence of working towards the completion of a high school diploma or GED certificate
24*	Student withdrew from/left school to enter college with documentation that he or she is working towards an Associate's or Bachelor's degree
25	Student withdrew from/left school to enter college with no evidence that he or she is working towards an Associate's or Bachelor's degree
26	Student was expelled (due to reasons other than criminal behavior), with no further participation in a school or educational program to continue working towards the completion of a high school diploma or GED certificate
27	Student failed exit TAAS, has not met all other graduation requirements, and has no evidence of further participation in a school or educational program to continue working towards the completion of a high school diploma or GED certificate
28	Student withdrew from school with declared intent to enroll in another Texas public school district
29*	Student withdrew from school with declared intent to enroll in a private school within Texas
30*	Student withdrew from/left school to enter a health care facility
31*	Student completed the GED, and district has acceptable documentation and student has not returned to school
60*	Student withdrew at request of student, parent, guardian, or other person with legal control of student for home schooling
61*	Student was incarcerated in a facility outside the boundaries of the district
62*	Student was withdrawn by the district when it discovered that the student was not a resident or had falsified enrollment information
63*	Student had graduated in a previous school year, returned to school, and then left again
64*	Student had received a GED in a previous school year, returned to school to work toward the completion of a high school diploma, and then left
65	Student did not return to school after completing a JJAEP term, and the students has not graduated or completed/received a GED
66*	Student was placed in the district by Child Protective Services (CPS), subsequently removed by CPS, and the district has not been informed of the student's current status or enrollment
99	Other (reason unknown or not listed above)

*School leavers coded with this LEAVER-REASON-CODE are not included in the calculation of the dropout rate used for accountability purposes.

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