

## ***The Importance of Identifying and Studying the Reasons Why Special Education Students Drop Out of High School***

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The impact of the recession on the American economy is felt by the majority as the rate of unemployment increases and the difficulty of getting a job doubles. The need for higher education has then been highlighted as many companies look for, if not college graduates, then at least a high school diploma in their applicants. “The importance of a high school education as a minimum standard for employment has dramatically increased over the past fifty years” (Brown and Chairez, 1999). This is made even more evident nowadays. Americans’ professional and monetary successes have always been mostly dependent on their educational achievements; and the same is still true today, especially in the face of a nationwide financial crisis (Shore, 2003). The increasing rate of high school students dropping out is a cause for great concern as it is inevitable for most of these students to have educational deficiencies that unconstructively affect their career opportunities and social interests throughout their adult lives (Rumberger, 2003). This then augments “a pattern of increased economic marginalization for those Americans with the least education” (Shore, 2003). Dropping out of high school—aside from the fact that it nullifies the students’ chances of going to college—reduces one’s career choices and advantages in a complex economic and social climate characterized by dynamic sophistication and finesse (Strother, 2006). Employment opportunities in today’s high skill-high wage economy require advanced skills that dropouts generally do not possess.

### ***The Negative Impacts of Noncompletion and Students with Disabilities***

An unfinished high school education produces serious consequences for the individual and society in term of economic impact and future productivity (Strother, 2006). These negative impacts include “unemployment, underemployment and higher rates of incarceration” (National High School Center, 2007). The harmful effects of noncompletion are enhanced when it comes to special education students because their disabilities already act as barriers that they need to overcome when it comes to their need and desire for employment and professional success. Their disabilities may act as deterrents to acceptance. They may have developed insecurities because of this and this then affects their relationship with their peers, making them loners, outcasts and generally making them feel left out. The study created by Christle, Jolivette and Michael (2007) shows that the feeling of being an outsider negatively contributes to a student’s motivation to stay in school. This is especially true for at-risk students like those with disabilities (Christle, Jolivette and Michael, 2007).

Most probably because of these facts, the dropout rates of students with disabilities have been found to be significantly greater than regular high school students (Blackorby and Wagner, 2006; deBettencourt, Zigmond and Thornton, 2005; Lehr, et al., 2004). Lehr, et al. (2004) also state that students with disabilities are at a greater risk of dropping out of high school. The fact that special education students “have been identified as being among the lowest performing students on current high-stakes tests” shows the urgency of the need for programs that can help them stay in school and graduate (Lehr, et al., 2004, p. 13). This is the cornerstone of many dropout prevention programs. However, these programs mostly target general student populations and students with disabilities are left behind.

## *Dropout Prevention for Students with Disabilities*

Education is at least equally, if not more important, for special education students as they face more difficulties as they confront their adult lives. They must be made equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to be able to function normally in society and achieve success both personally and professionally. This is the main reason why it must be guaranteed that more and more special education students graduate high school and given more opportunities to move on to higher education. In order to address this issue properly, it is highly important for the causes and reasons for special education students dropping out of high school to be examined. It must be considered that this task involves, not only looking at the reasons why these high school students drop out, but also the identification of factors and variables that may positively or negatively correlate to the reasons why they drop out. Examples of these variables include race/ethnicity, type of disability, gender, and financial stability. Factors, on the other hand, include school attendance, school achievement, student engagement and relationship with peers, teachers and family (Reschly and Christenson, 2006; Christle, Jolivette and Michael, 2007; Bear, Kortering and Braziel, 2006).

In order to present a comprehensive study that takes into consideration all the factors needed to be able to arrive at accurate results and develop a methodology that can both be replicated and applied to other demographics, the question “Who is dropping out of high school?” needs to be answered (Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison, 2006). In this case, students with disabilities need to be characterized in order to ascertain these characteristics’ correlation to their decision to drop out of high school. That is why this study’s goal is to be able to get in touch with students with disabilities that have dropped out of high school in the recent school years. In this way, data will be gathered that is most pertinent to the study. It is important to examine these characteristics and personality traits in order to be able to ascertain why they have dropped out. For instance, a certain school may have a high percentage of students with disabilities who have dropped out who have a low GPA. This may say that they dropped out because they could not handle academics well and were generally failing. A dropout prevention strategy for this school may be monitoring and mentoring, wherein a student with low grades are monitored and tutored for improvement. In this way, dropout prevention programs will be more personalized and effective.

Disabilities should also be considered per category, as well as per state and locality in order to be able to maximize the effectiveness of programs that aim to reduce high school drop outs. It should be ensured that everything is being done to be able to provide more and better opportunities for these students who are already at a disadvantage when it comes to being able to become functional members of society. Although the concept of inclusion popularized by IDEA 2004 promotes students with disabilities being integrated in regular classrooms in order for them to feel included and so that they may be able to interact with regular student—building relationships and maximizing learning at the same time—it must not be forgotten that these students also have special needs and these needs to be addressed. Some ways of doing this are monitoring, developing resiliency skills among students with disabilities, and increasing motivation and school engagement (Lehr, et al., 2004; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Reschly and Christenson, 2006; Harris, 2008). Other times, it is as simple as providing appropriate physical facilities for special education students.

## *A Call to Action*

It is sad to say, though, that it is only recently that awareness for the dropout rates of special education students have arisen. This is because “students with disabilities are included in the “all students” agenda of federal, state, and district standards-based reforms” through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Thurlow, Sinclair and Johnson, 2002). Furthermore, studies that have been conducted that present usable data related to students with disabilities that can be adapted to the present times are very few compared to studies of dropout rates of regular students (Lehr, et al., 2004, p. 13). In fact, as Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison (2006) state. “The public has been almost entirely unaware of the severity of the dropout problem due to inaccurate data.” This makes the task all the more pressing and difficult. This also augments the functionality and usefulness of the results of a study that aims to calculate the top reasons why students with disabilities drop out as it will present updated data that can be used by future researchers, dropout prevention programs and schools. Furthermore, the study can be replicated and applied to other states, school districts and individual schools. This doubles the purpose of the study. Aside from presenting usable data, it can provide an effective avenue of studying the reasons why they drop out in order to create more personalized and effective strategies that will increase high school completion rates of students with varying disabilities.

Both the government and schools should work together in order to create programs that will effectively address this problem. Identifying the top reasons why students with disabilities drop out of high school involves the inclusion of a lot of factors and variables that may correlate to a the act of dropping out. Although this task is difficult, it must be undertaken as the findings can be translated to tangible positive results in dropout prevention. With the current educational policies and dropout prevention programs and strategies, educators should gain more ground in making special education students stay in school and graduate. For regular students, high school completion is equated to an avenue to enter university to be able embark professional careers, earn good money and live the good life. However, for students with disabilities, it is so much more. High school graduation is the day that they are given more opportunities to live a normal and independent life.

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