

## High School Dropout Dilemma in America and the Importance of Reformation of Education Systems to Empower All Students

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### Abstract:

Dropout happens when a student withdraws themselves from school at any level of education without a certificate to account for their education. It is an educational problem in America because of its negative consequences on society. Three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma, and yet, just over half of American citizens acquire that extent of education. Out of the industrialized nations, America holds one of the most significant high school dropout rates. Half of the students who begin college will never finish. School dropouts are intelligent individuals capable of offering a lot to the world. However, because they never complete their studies, their abilities may never transpire to their full effectiveness. Hence, solving school dropouts is key to national development. Adolescents who drop out of school vary in demographics and socioeconomic status. There is also a correlation between students with disabilities and the dropout rate. This paper discusses school dropouts in the United States to contribute to its solutions. It examines the causal factors and the effects of school dropouts on individuals and society. School dropout is prevalent among vulnerable groups, and the cost to disadvantaged individuals, families, communities, and nations is high. Since school dropout status has negative consequences, moderating this dilemma benefits the individual and broader society, locally and globally.

**Keywords:** Drop out, education system, high school, poverty, vulnerable students.

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## INTRODUCTION

School dropout happens when a student leaves school at any level of education without a certificate to account for their schooling period and education (Doren et al., 2014; Glennie et al., 2012; Mennen et al., 2022; Nittle, 2019; Plasman & Gottfried, 2018). “The *status dropout rate* represents the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development certificate)” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). School dropout is a global educational phenomenon and a problem because of the negative consequences it has on the student, family, community, nation, and society (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Irwin et al., 2021; Levin & Belfield, 2007; Mennen et al., 2022). Individuals are the smallest units of families that play a critical role in the growth and development of communities and heritage (Moll et al., 1992). Hence, students who drop out of school are a wasted investment by the families, communities, and countries since these children and youth do not have a chance to display their knowledge and skills and use their experiences or repertoires to benefit self and their society (Mennen et al., 2022; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021; Willits et al., 2013).

School dropouts are vulnerable to economic, political, social, and climatic changes (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). They have limited knowledge and skills to adapt to new emerging situations that often are fraught with opportunities and challenges. The economic problems weaken school dropouts. Furthermore, this leads to the erosion of their confidence, making it difficult for them to adapt or manage positively during uncertain times. The ripple effect of this instability experienced by school dropouts is endured by the family, community, and society. School dropouts lead to lost opportunities in all human realms, including education, labor, health, security, and businesses (Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Peguero et al., 2018). It contributes to the wastage of resources and increased debt, both to the individual and governments (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Glennie et al., 2012).

Three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma (e.g., nurse practitioners, wind turbine service technicians, solar photovoltaic installers). And yet, slightly over half of American citizens have that education level (Irwin et al., 2021). The United States has one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation (Lee & Polachek, 2018). Half of the students who begin college will never finish. United States has invested in addressing the school dropout problem, which has yielded positive results (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The status dropout rate is the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a GED certificate). In 2019, the overall status dropout rate decreased from 8.3% in 2010 to 5.1% in 2019. This decrease was reflected among the different student populations. The status dropout rate for Asian 16- to 24-year-olds was 1.8%, that of White was 4.1%, those with Two

or more races were 5.1%, Black was 5.6%, Hispanic was 7.7%, Pacific Islander was 8.0%, and American Indian/Alaska Native was 9.6%. Still, over 2 million students ages 16 to 24 never complete their high school education (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Therefore, solving school dropouts is crucial to national development. Addressing school dropouts is key to rebuilding individual confidence, preventing and recovering community losses, and making nations safer and stronger (Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Peguero et al., 2018). Making learning institutions friendly to all learners is vital to empowering all students with the knowledge and skills needed to compete for opportunities in a neoliberalized globalized market economy. This article discusses the predicaments of school dropouts and presents ideas related to school dropouts in the United States for plausible solutions locally and globally. It offers strategies for educators to implement to decrease dropout rates.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

High school dropouts affect high-income and low-income countries (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Levin & Belfield, 2007). The current predicament facing secondary education in the U.S. is the high dropout rate among students (Doren et al., 2014; McMurrey, 2014). School dropout in the U.S. is at its highest point in the current years of formal education (Irwin et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Compared to other high-income countries (e.g., Belgium, Britain, Finland, France, Germany), the U.S. has one of the highest high school dropouts (Lee & Polachek, 2018; McMurrey, 2014; The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2009). Numerous studies have looked into multiple causal factors of school dropouts, focusing on the demographics of students, including disability, race, school factors, and socioeconomic status (Doll et al., 2013; Dunn et al., 2004; Nittle, 2019; Plasman & Gottfried, 2018). Researchers have also examined how schools manage the dropout epidemic (Nittle, 2019). Many factors, such as teen pregnancy, race, class, region, religion, and the disability of students, influence the dropout of students (Blackorby et al., 1991; Doll et al., 2013; Dunn et al., 2004; Heissel, 2019; Kortering & Braziel, 1999a; Nittle, 2019). Many students predisposed to school dropouts are minorities, those with a meager income, those that are 18 years or older, those who have disabilities, those who are pregnant and/or parenting, and those who are homeless or housing insecure (Blackorby et al., 1991; Glennie et al., 2012; Masterson, 2021; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Peguero et al., 2018). Impoverished environments further predispose children and youth to harsh conditions that harm their socio-emotional wellbeing and negatively affect their predisposition or personalities (Glennie et al., 2012; Lee & Polachek, 2018). The assumption that expectant teenage students and students with a learning disability have behavioral problems leads to a potential exiting before high school completion.

Some school environments are less stimulating to students; they lack the initiative to motivate disadvantaged students to graduate (Doren et al., 2014; Glennie et al., 2012; McWilliams et al., 2000). In addition, some schools figure with their demographics that there

will be a consistent failure rate due to the socioeconomic statuses of students and their family's lifestyles (Moll et al., 1992). McWilliams and colleagues (2000) noted that much of the dropout research has focused on fixed attributes, such as minority and low socioeconomic status, which are beyond the control of the school and have been used as an excuse not to do anything to address the dropout problem (Dunn et al., 2004). However, definite stresses do sequentially line up when a student (who is not yet at maturity level) manages themselves in a situation. The remedy to this solution may lie within the school's means of assistance. In sum, even though students with disabilities show a high dropout rate (Bakken & Kortering, 1999), it is encouraging to recognize that some of the variables associated with dropout are alterable and can be addressed through proactive programming (Dunn et al., 2004; Lee & Polachek, 2018).

Previous studies have focused on the dynamics determining the outcome of the situations leading to poor school performance (Glennie et al., 2012; Irwin et al., 2021; Moll et al., 1992) and exiting school without a diploma (Doren et al., 2014; Lee & Polachek, 2018). The dynamics include demographics, socioeconomic status, race, school factors, and disability, immigration status (Doll et al., 2013; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020). Indicators of data collection on low-income, minority families, and household locations present that the backgrounds of students of these factors are more likely to drop out of school than their peers (Blackorby et al., 1991; Peguero et al., 2018). Research has shown many legitimate statistics for students falling under these demographics and socioeconomic statuses. For example, teen pregnancy setbacks demonstrate a higher range of variable difficulties in high school (Heissel, 2019; Masterson, 2021; Nittle, 2019). In addition, teen mothers display a marked decrease in test scores, an increase in grade repetition and high school dropout, and a decrease in college attendance and graduation relative to female students who had been on a similar trajectory before birth (Heissel, 2019).

Studies have shown that students with a disability are more likely to drop out than those without a disability (Doll et al., 2013; Doren et al., 2014; Irwin et al., 2021). Some factors leading to this lie within the school. For example, some schools do not want to take in resources and time, especially if the student with a learning disability or assumed disability exhibits nonconforming, erroneous, or challenging behavior (Blackorby et al., 1991; Doll et al., 2013; Heissel, 2019; Moll et al., 1992; Nittle, 2019; Peguero et al., 2018). This also leads to educators losing confidence in their students with disabilities to graduate high school.

## METHOD

This study uses archival research to examine the school dropout in the United States. Various documents about school dropouts were analyzed during the process. Archival findings were compared with the literature findings from empirical and extant work. Sources of data included U.S. government reports (e.g., reports from the Departments of

Education, Labor, Housing and Urban Development) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2021; U.S. Department of Labor, 2021), non-governmental institutions (Child Trends Databank, 2018) or national organizations reports (e.g., World Bank, World Health Organization) (<https://usafacts.org/data/topics/people-society/education/k-12-education/high-school-dropout-rate/>), national and international media reports (New York Times), and social media [e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp] (Levin & Belfield, 2007). The primary data source was the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) which collects, analyzes, and makes available educational data in the U.S. and other nations (<https://nces.ed.gov/>). The NCES data only includes dropout rates for high school students from public school districts. The NCES data is widely used, although some schools underreport the number of students who have dropped out as having transferred to other schools primarily because of accountability measures (Lee & Polachek, 2018). For these reasons, the authors gathered more data through observations and recollections of their experiences in their communities in various locations in the U.S. between 2019-2022. Authors reflected on their interactions with struggling individuals/families and happenings in schools and communities. These helped with the triangulation of data.

Data retrieval and analysis involved perusing each document or website by keeping records of various information about high school dropouts in the United States. The researchers conferred and compared notes to ensure correct data was recorded.

## RESULTS

Nearly half of American citizens have a high school level of education. At the same time, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations in the neo-liberalized globalized, digitized market economy require more than a high school diploma (Irwin et al., 2021). However, the United States has one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation, although the dropout rates have declined over the decades (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). An average of 2 million students drop out of high school in the United States every year, and around 25% of first-year high school students fail to graduate on time. The graduation rates of Hispanic and African American students lag that of Asian-American and white students (Murnane, 2013). Nearly 2,000 high schools in the U.S. graduate less than 60% of their student population (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Murnane, 2013). The dropout factories (i.e., a high school having a high proportion of students who drop out before completing their course of study) account for over 50% of the students who leave school yearly (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). One in six students attend a dropout factory, and one in three minority students (32%) attend a dropout factory, compared to 8% of white students (Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

The dropout rates among 16- to 24-year-olds have declined in the past four decades (Chapman et al., 2011; Child Trends Databank, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The dropout rate has declined considerably, from 15% in 1970 to 6% in 2016 (Child Trends Databank, 2018). See Tables 1 and 2. It also decreased from 12.1% in 1990 to 7.4% in 2010 and from 8.3% in 2010 to 5.3% in 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The decrease in dropout rates was sustained among 16- to 24-year-olds with different demographics and socioeconomic statuses, including disability.

**Table 1**

*Dropout Rate Among 16- to 24-year-olds by Decades*

<b>Decade</b>	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s
<b>Percentage</b>	27.2	14.96	14.07	12.07	10.93	7.42	5.28

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

**Table 2**

*Dropout Rate Among 16- to 24-year-olds by years*

<b>Year</b>	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>Percentage</b>	8.3	7.7	7	6.8	6.3	6.0	5.8	5.4	5.3	5.1	5.3

Source: NCES

In 2020, there was a race and ethnicity status differentiation in the dropout rate. The status dropout rates for Asian 16- to 24-year-olds (2.4%) were lower than the rates for Black (4.2%) and White (4.8%). All three rates were lower than the rate for those who were Hispanic (7.4%). The status dropout rate for Asian 16- to 24-year-olds was also lower than that for those of Two or more races (6.5%) and American Indian/Alaska Native (11.5%). Also, the rate for those who were Black was lower than the rate for those who were American Indian/Alaska Native.

Furthermore, the overall status dropout rate for 16- to 24-year-olds decreased from 8.3% in 2010 to 5.3% in 2020. Between 2010 and 2020, the status dropout rate declined for Hispanics (from 15.2% to 7.4%) and Black (from 8.0% to 4.2%). In 2020, the status dropout rates for those who were American Indian/Alaska Native, of Two or more races, White or Asian, were not measurably different from the rates in 2010. In addition, the status dropout rates in 2019—the year before the coronavirus pandemic—were not significantly different from those in 2020 for any racial/ethnic group.

The dropout rates for various groups differed from 2015 to 2019: Hispanic from 15.2% to 7.5%, American Indian/Alaska Native from 7% to 9.6%, Black from 6.5% to 5.6%, White from 4.6% to 4.1%, Asian from (no record of 2015, but 2017 4.7%) to 1.8%, and of Two or more races from 4% to 5.1%. In 2019, the overall status dropout rate was 5.3% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). See Table 3.

**Table 3***Dropout Rate by Race/Ethnicity Among 16- to 24-year-olds*

<b>Year</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>Race/ ethnicity</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Hispanics	27.59	32.37	29.99	27.79	22.45	15.15	9.17	9.46	7.46	7.37
Blacks	15.15	13.24	12.06	13.11	10.44	8.02	6.47	5.67	5.62	4.18
American Indian/Alaska Native	-	-	-	-	-	12.4	7	4.4	9.6	11.5
White	10.43	8.98	8.58	6.93	5.96	5.07	4.56	3.9	4.1	4.8
Asian	-	-	-	-	-	4.1	-	4.7	1.8	2.4
Two or more races	-	-	-	-	-	5.4	4	4	5.1	6.5
Pacific Islander	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	2	8.0	-

Source: NCES

As shown in Table 4, the dropout rates for 16- to 24-year-olds born outside the United States were 10.1%, Hispanic 15.8%, Non-Hispanic 4.4%, and the First generation 4.4%, Hispanic 6.1%, Non-Hispanic 2.2%, Second generation or higher was 5% for Hispanic and Non-Hispanic.

**Table 4***Dropout Rates by Immigrant Status Among 16- to 24-year-olds in 2020*

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Born outside the United States</b>	<b>First generation</b>	<b>Second generation or higher</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>10.1</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>5.0</b>
Hispanic	15.8	6.1	5.0
Non-Hispanic	4.4	2.2	5.0

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS).

Note:

- Born outside the United States— Children born abroad to U.S.-citizen parents are counted as born in the United States.
- First generation— were born in the United States, but one or both of their parents were born outside the United States.

- Second generation or higher— were born in the United States, as were both of their parents.

The dropout rate by immigrant status and race/ethnicity among 16- to 24-year-olds in 2020 varied. Overall, in 2020, non-Hispanic groups of 16- to 24-year-olds who had been born outside the United States had a higher status dropout rate (10.1%) than those who were first generation (4.4%) and those who were second generation or higher (5.0%). For the Hispanics, the status dropout rate was higher for those who had been born outside the United States (15.8%) than for those who were first generation (6.1%) and those who were second generation or higher (5.0%). Contrastingly, among the non-Hispanic groups, the status dropout rate was higher for both those who had been born outside the United States (4.4%) and those who were a second generation or higher (5.0%) than for those who were first generation (2.2%). In addition, among those born outside the United States and those who were the first generation, status dropout rates were higher for those who were Hispanic than for their non-Hispanic peers. However, the status dropout rate did not measurably differ by Hispanic ethnicity for those who were a second generation or higher. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). See Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Dropout Rate by Immigrant Status and Race/Ethnicity Among 16- to 24-year-olds*

<b>Year</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>%</b>
Born out of U.S.: Hispanics	15.8
1 <sup>st</sup> generation: Hispanics	6.1
2 <sup>nd</sup> generation or higher: Hispanics	5.0
Born out of U.S.: non-Hispanic groups	4.4
1 <sup>st</sup> generation or higher: non-Hispanic groups	2.2
2 <sup>nd</sup> generation or higher: non-Hispanic groups	5.0

Source: NCES

In 2020, the overall status dropout rate for 16- to 24-year-olds differed by age from 2010. The status dropout rate was higher in 2020 than in 2010 for 16-year-olds (5.6% vs. 2.0%) and 17-year-olds (5.8% vs. 3.5%). Contrastingly, the status dropout rate was lower in 2020 than in 2010 for 19-year-olds (5.2% vs. 7.9%) and 20- to 24-year-olds (5.1% vs. 9.3%). The status dropout rate for 18-year-olds in 2020 and 2010 was insignificant. See Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Dropout Rate by Age Among 16- to 24-year-olds*

<b>Year</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>Age</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
16	2.0	5.6
17	3.5	5.8



18	6.8	5.4
19	7.9	5.2
20-24	9.3	5.1

Source: NCES

The status dropout rate differed by disability status in 2017, 2019, and 2020. For example, the rate was 5.1% for 16- to 24-year-olds without a disability, compared with 9.7% for those with a disability in 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). See Table 7.

**Table 7**

*Dropout Rate by Disability Status Among 16- to 24-year-olds*

Year	2017	2019	2020
Percentage	%	%	%
Students without disability	4.6	4.7	5.1
Students with disabilities	6.2	10.7	9.7

Source: NCES

As shown in Table 8, the status dropout rate also differed by sex status among 16- to 24-year-olds in the past three decades. In 1980 dropout rates for males was 15.08% and females 13.09%, in 1990 male 12.32%, female 10.71%, in 2000 male 19.64%, female 9.87%, in 2010 male 8.49, female 6.33%, in 2020 male 6.2%, female 4.4%.

**Table 8**

*Dropout Rate by Sex Status Among 16- to 24-year-olds*

Year	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2010	2015	2017	2019	2020
Percentage	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Male	15.08	13.4	12.32	12.2	19.64	8.49	6.29	6.58	6.0	6.2
Female	13.09	11.78	10.71	11.74	9.87	6.33	5.41	4.95	4.2	4.4

Source: NCES

The status dropout rate also differed by household income among families of 16- to 24-year-olds in the past three decades. In 1980 dropout rates for low income were 27%, middle-lower income 18.1%, middle-upper income 10.7%, and high income 5.7%. In 1990 dropout rates for low income were 24.3%, middle-lower income 15.1%, middle-upper income 8.7%, and high income 2.9%. In 2000 dropout rates for low income was 20.7%, middle-lower income 12.8%, middle-upper income 8.3%, and high income 3.5%. In 2010 dropout rates for low income were 13.8%, middle-lower income 8.9%, middle-upper income 5.1%, and high income 2.5%. In 2015 dropout rates for low income were 9.9%, middle-lower income 7.4%, middle-upper income 4.3%, and high income 2.4%. See Table 9.

**Table 9***Dropout Rate by Household Income of 16- to 24-year-olds*

<b>Year</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2015</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Low income	27.0	27.1	24.3	23.2	20.7	17.9	13.8	9.9
Middle-Lower Income	18.1	14.7	15.1	13.8	12.8	11.5	8.9	7.4
Middle-Upper Income	10.7	8.3	8.7	8.3	8.3	7.1	5.1	4.3
High Income	5.7	4.0	2.9	3.6	3.5	2.7	2.5	2.4

Source: NCES

The status dropout rate also differed by employment status among 16- to 24-year-olds in the past three decades. The dropout rates of employed 50.4%, unemployed 17.02%, and those not in the labor force were 32.58% in 1980 and employed 52.44%, unemployed 6.19%, and those not in the labor force 41.37% in 2020. See Table 10.

**Table 10***Dropout Rate by Employment Status of 16- to 24-year-olds*

<b>Year</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Employed	50.4	52.46	56.93	45.8	52.44
Unemployed	17.02	13.33	12.26	18.73	6.19
Not in Labor Force	32.58	34.2	30.81	35.47	41.37

Source: NCES

## DISCUSSION

In this section, we discuss the predicaments of school dropouts and present ideas related to high school dropouts in the United States to contribute to its solutions locally and globally. Solving school dropouts is key to national development and society's welfare. Expanding the promise of education in America as well as globally is good for humankind. Increased communication and travel have become more accessible, leading to globalized networks and competition for opportunities and resources. Education has become indispensable in the global economy, whereas the most valuable skill one can sell is knowledge. Thus, a good education is a prerequisite and pathway to opportunities (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Three-quarters of the emerging occupations require more than a high school education. Unfortunately, less than half of the population in the United

States has that level of education to participate in the digital capitalist market economy. The problem is exacerbated by the high rates of high school dropouts.

### Impact of High School Dropout

School dropout costs individuals, families, communities, countries, and societies (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Glennie et al., 2012). Levin and Belfield (2007) write that each high school dropout costs the United States economy \$272,000 due to lower tax contributions, higher reliance on tax-funded medical services, higher rates of criminal involvement, and higher reliance on welfare systems. Students who drop out of high school are disadvantaged in all realms, especially socio-economically, compared to those who earn a high school diploma and above (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Bouchrika, 2021; Glennie et al., 2012). So, they burden society (Levin & Belfield, 2007). High school dropouts experience personal long-term social, and economic consequences that finally negatively impact communities and nations (Glennie et al., 2012; Lee-St. John et al., 2018). In the current neo-liberalized globalized, digitized market economy, having a high school diploma is necessary for enrolling in tertiary institutions and obtaining many minimum-wage jobs (e.g., cashier, security officer) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021, U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

In America, school dropouts make up nearly half the heads of households on welfare. High school dropouts are likely to live in poverty and have their families in poverty (U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2021). This is because of limited opportunities and their vulnerabilities to harmful environments in adulthood. Limited opportunities for advancement mean that high school dropouts experience poverty-related issues such as “higher levels of alcohol consumption, poorer mental and physical health, and increased likelihood of committing criminal acts and of becoming dependent on welfare and government programs than people with higher educational attainment” (Glennie et al., 2012, p. 3). It is estimated that a high school dropout earns USD200,000 less than a high school graduate over their lifetime and about USD 800,000 less than a college graduate (Cheeseman et al., 2014). Poverty is a catalyst for social ills. Therefore, school dropouts are susceptible to the judicial system hence the school-prison pipeline (Irwin et al., 2022). It is estimated that high school dropouts commit nearly 75% of the crimes in the U.S. (Forhad, 2021; Gerlinger & Hipp, 2020; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Peguero et al., 2018; Willits et al., 2013).

### Causal Factors of School Dropout

Many factors are attributed to increased student dropout rates in the United States (Bouchrika, 2021; Doll et al., 2013). These include inaccessible curricula, poverty or low socioeconomic status, disasters (e.g., hurricanes, COVID-19), unfriendly school settings, inaccessible infrastructure due to dilapidated facilities or amenities or equipment, limited

or lack of resources (e.g., libraries and computers) and services (e.g., counseling), shortage or ill-equipped educators (e.g., novice or underpaid and unmotivated teachers), economic hardships (e.g., due economic recession, corruption, or unemployment) (Glennie et al., 2012; Lee & Polachek, 2018). Other risk factors are personal conditions such as disability (because of lack of services and resources such as assistive technology, stigma, and prejudice) (Blackorby et al., 1991; Doren et al., 2014), insecurities such as school shootings, criminal victimization, bullying, disciplinary problems and actions, fights, accessibility to weapons, availability and student use/abuse of drugs and alcohol, negative student perceptions of personal safety at school, the presence of security staff at school, and criminal incidents in nearby learning institutions or communities (Bouchrika, 2021; Glennie et al., 2012; Irwin et al., 2022; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Peguero et al., 2018). Students also leave school for many reasons, “including academic failure, disciplinary problems, wanting or needing to start work, and having a family or children” (e.g., teenage pregnancy) (Glennie et al., 2012, p. 3).

Curricula have a significant impact on students’ performances and school attendance. For example, an inaccessible or unfriendly curriculum predisposes students to high rates of high school dropout. The curriculum affects students learning in many ways. An unfavorable curriculum leads to poor academic performance, grade retention, or unnecessary punishments (e.g., low expectations and bullying). Students who drop out of high school find the curriculum less connected to their learning needs. Usually, these students do not see education as interesting, valuable, and worth their investment and/or sacrifice, especially when taking high-stakes tests. In addition, the high stakes testing policies that mandate grade repetition and high school exit exams are the tipping points for students who struggle academically. These extra demands push these students out of school.

Moreover, some well-established schools push out students deemed weak or having behavioral issues (Glennie et al., 2012). Conversely, high-performing schools attract many students. This happens because families often look for schools that will enhance their children’s learning and possibilities of passing examinations and transitioning to better colleges or careers. While improvements in school performance lead to improved success for many students, the pressure for schools to maintain high scores and the best position in the region often works against struggling learners. Schools experiencing pressure to improve their overall performance or accountability score usually pursue this increase at the cost of other student outcomes, including the dropout rate (Glennie et al., 2012).

Poverty is prevalent among American children and youth and is a significant cause of high school dropouts ( Lee & Polachek, 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022; Vázquez-Nava et al., 2019). In 2020, the official poverty rate stood at 11.4%: 37.2 million Americans experienced poverty, and 16.1% of people under 18 years lived in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), 16 million American children (Rothwell et al., 2019). The disproportionate child poverty rates also negatively affect the learning outcomes of children from minority

groups such as immigrants, Black/African Americans, Hispanic, Indigenous communities, and children with disabilities (Lee & Polachek, 2018; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Peguero et al., 2018).

Poverty causes insecurities and hostilities in homes, schools, and communities (Forhad, 2021; Gerlinger & Hipp, 2020; Vázquez-Nava et al., 2019; Willits et al., 2013). Families in poverty experience food insecurities that often lead to children's malnourishment and are also vulnerable to violence (e.g., gender-based violence) because of tensions and competition to survive in the community (Irwin et al., 2022; Mennen et al., 2022; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Peguero et al., 2018). U.S. Government combats food insecurity through Title 1 Program. The program provides financial help to elementary and high schools with a high student population from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html>). Still, millions of children continue to live in poverty, negatively impacting their education. Lack or limited shelter, clean water, electricity, Internet, technology (e.g., computers in the home), and limited access to the correct information directly or indirectly impact parents' and students' school participation and academic outcome (Vázquez-Nava et al., 2019) despite those families in poverty hold the same attitudes about education as affluent families (Obinna & Ohanian, 2020).

Thus, addressing education inequities is critical in taming high school dropouts. This requires the reformation of education systems

### Reformation of Education Systems

The high school dropout problem will increase through 2022 and the future unless significant improvements are made in the education system. Tackling school dropouts is necessary to rebuild individual confidence, prevent and recover community losses, and make nations stable, safer, and more robust (Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Peguero et al., 2018). Furthermore, strong, quality, accessible education for all children and youth is necessary to produce skilled and knowledgeable citizens capable of participating in a local and global market economy. Less educated citizens are less prepared to compete in the neo-liberalized globalized market economy. For this reason, it is essential for the United States and other countries to redesign and invest in education to ensure that all children and youth have access to a complete and competitive education. This will allow them to gain knowledge and repertoires needed for them to engage in the wellbeing of the community and nation. Below are measures that the United States should institute to deal with high school dropout issues.

### *1. Increased Investment in Education*

Critical for communities and nations is an investment in education — expanded early childhood education to improve its quality and ensure children have access to formative learning to prepare them for primary and secondary education and college education (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2009). Communities and governments must invest in innovative programs that help learning institutions meet high standards, close achievement gaps, and reduce or eliminate school dropouts. Equally important is expanding primary and secondary education by investing in accessible schools. Also, the government and nations must make college affordable for millions of qualified students who miss opportunities due to lack of information, the prohibitive cost of learning, poor economy, and mismanagement of resources. Such measures would incentivize learners to invest and succeed in their studies. At the same time, high schools must be resourced with appropriate facilities and teachers competent in their subject areas to offer quality education with eagerness to learn for children and youth.

Good education benefits individuals and society (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Increased investment in education to expand its accessibility to children and youth from low-income families is critical in taming social or human-induced disasters (e.g., crimes) that emerge due to various insecurities, including lack or limited food, water, and shelter (Irwin et al., 2022; Lee-St. John et al., 2018; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Peguero et al., 2018; Willits et al., 2013). An improved economic environment increases the quality of living and opportunities for investment in education. Challenging financial situations increase families' vulnerabilities and the possibility of school-age children and youth dropping out of school. Struggling families are more likely to encounter difficulties such as paying tuition fees, having health insurance, and becoming vulnerable to hardships during the economic recession. Therefore, helping students see the value of education requires individuals, society, and governments to invest in areas like energy, health care, and education. These areas support the nation's economic growth so that students can acquire decent jobs upon completion of school and training. Investments in sectors of the economy, particularly in education, are essential in training highly qualified teachers and hiring them so they can educate all learners (Kortering & Braziel, 1999ab; Nittle, 2019).

There is a need for an increased school budget to make school amenities/facilities and equipment accessible and friendly for teaching and learning for all school participants from diverse families and communities. Although it is not apparent that schools with a reasonable budget have a much better influence on students and teachers and so contribute to improved academic performance (Lee & Polachek, 2018), communities and governments must increase the education budget and ensure everyone is accountable to the money invested in education to the benefit of all learners including those from vulnerable communities. In addition, taming school dropouts require significant resources from the government and private sector. The government, however, must be at the forefront of

spurring the private sector to invest in education. In addition, it must create the right conditions for entrepreneurs and new businesses to adapt and thrive in education and other economic sectors (e.g., healthcare).

Investments in all sectors are significant in the education sector's growth and development. An improved economy leads to increased security in all areas, access to quality healthcare, better housing, reduced homelessness, and enhanced wellbeing of the individual, families, and communities. In turn, investment in education is vital in addressing school dropouts. Investments are needed in building new schools to accommodate the increased student population, hiring highly qualified teachers and paying them well to retain them in the field, restocking schools with modern technologies, and adopting robust curricula relevant to the necessities of individuals, families, and society. Given these realities, everyone has to sacrifice some worthy priorities to solve short- and long-term problems. Society cannot afford to ignore short- and long-term challenges. Most importantly is addressing the short-term difficulties. For instance, having all school-aged students back to school requires immediate measures since these children and youth may not be able to return to school past a certain age. It requires new school facilities (e.g., buildings or laboratories) and an increased teacher population to reduce the high teacher-student ratio. A high teacher-student percentage increases the social distance between teachers and students and limits the possibilities of teachers knowing and attending to individual learner needs.

## *2. Adoption of Progressive Curricula*

The curricula are the window through which learners see the value of education. Those who do not see themselves in the curricula are less likely to value that specific education. Those less motivated (because of the exclusionary curriculum) are vulnerable to school dropouts. Therefore, the school curriculum must reflect the needs of a diverse population to encourage their participation in learning. Measures to improve school performance and increase academic performance and graduation rates of students have involved the provision of resources (e.g., increased budgetary) (Lee & Polachek, 2018) and the adoption of high-stake tests as a means of measuring teachers worth (Glennie et al., 2012). Often this has resulted in teaching to test rather than educators' investment in the inculcation of knowledge and skills needed by students to survive and contribute positively to humanity. Tests have become a means of holding teachers accountable to the community and nation. Unfortunately, accountability systems (e.g., high-stakes tests) contribute to discrimination, prejudices, and exclusion of students with disabilities or those at risk, which often lead to increased school dropout (Bakken & Kortering, 1999). Therefore, there is a need to remove any indirect benefit a school may receive from increasing its dropout rate. Instead, learning institutions should be held accountable for students dropping out of school (Glennie et al., 2012). Dropout has high personal and social costs (Glennie et al., 2012).

Therefore, accountability systems should emphasize preventing school dropouts. This can be realized when high-stakes tests and other examinations are adopted to inform teaching rather than pit students, schools, or teachers against each other (Glennie et al., 2012).

Some tests have become a punishment tool that pits students against each other and leads to unhealthy competition among teachers, schools, and communities. Unhealthy school competitions harm vulnerable families, their children, and the larger society (McFarland et al., 2019). Therefore, an appropriate curriculum is necessary for addressing the learning needs of students from marginalized communities, including those with disabilities whose schooling is rarely emphasized (Bear et al., 2006). The curriculum should facilitate learning rather than punish students and force them to quit school. Specifically, school tests should be used to inform best teaching practices that reflect the conditions of learners and the school. Good assessments should guide teaching and learning, help transform learners and teachers, and reform school institutions.

### *3. Promotion of Friendly Learning Settings*

School dropouts happen because of hostile school environments. Many students are pushed out of school by harsh school environments and practices (Glennie et al., 2012). Some high schools have particular practices and policies that discourage or demotivate students. The unwelcoming practices, such as certain disciplinary policies and accountability systems, diminish students' inclusion and belonging (Bakken & Kortering, 1999; Blackorby et al., 1991; Heissel, 2019; Nittle, 2019; Peguero et al., 2018). Some high schools require students who score low grades, have attendance problems, or behavior that is not consistent with the student body to face long-term consequences such as suspensions and referrals to alternative programs (e.g., special education or placement in isolated classes). These measures often see students withdraw involuntarily from school (Glennie et al., 2021).

Making learning institutions friendly to all learners is needed to empower all students with the knowledge and skills required to compete for opportunities and productively participate in a neo-liberalized globalized economy (Glennie et al., 2012; Nittle, 2019). High school education must be made valuable to learners to motivate them. Suitable learning environments must be promoted to eliminate sexual harassment, predation, and teenage pregnancies that cause high dropout rates for young girls. Hence, this contributes to the stigma, prejudices, and biases that prevent girls and women from pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and careers or administration roles. Having role models for children and youth from marginalized communities (e.g., girls, African Americans, native people, or people with disabilities) is critical in taming demotivating factors that contribute to high school dropouts in high schools (Doll et al., 2013; Dunn et al., 2004; Lee-St. John et al., 2018; Masterson, 2021; Nittle, 2019; Plasman & Gottfried, 2018).



#### *4. Adaptation of Inclusive Practices*

There is a demand for adapting inclusive practices to meet students' needs. Educators should be at the forefront in advancing the inclusion of children, particularly from disadvantaged communities, by offering various resources and supports (e.g., access to resources such as counseling). The school community, teachers, and staff, in particular, must support the implementation of laws and policies that prohibit discrimination against vulnerable populations, for example, girls or those with disabilities or from minority groups (e.g., LGBTQ+) (Bakken & Kortering, 1999). Learning opportunities should be tailored to individual child's abilities and needs to help them belong in schools. As Bakken and Kortering mention, "the profession's intent of creating an individualized education tailored to meet the needs of individual students must extend to the issue of school completion" (1999a, p. 365). Therefore, educators must develop a plan that focuses on dropout prevention and maximizes the inclusion of students, especially those with special needs (Kortering & Braziel, 1999a; Nittle, 2019). Minimizing dropout percentages of vulnerable students, including children with disabilities, is possible when educators implement education plans such as individualized education plans (IEP) and the 504 plans to ensure students at risk receive appropriate support before, during, and after joining school (Bakken & Kortering, 1999; Bear et al., 2006). Besides, teachers can model, practice, and reinforce expected behavioral and social skills to implement school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports to tame challenging or inconsistent behaviors (Pyle & Wexler, 2011; Sugai et al., 2009).

#### *5. Transformation of Educators*

Many students drop out of school because of poor teacher attitude, teacher incompetency, and educators' usage of learning materials (e.g., tests) to punish learners (Lee-St. John et al., 2018). Novice or poorly trained teachers make learning content difficult and the classroom hostile to learners, especially from minority groups (e.g., African Americans and students with disabilities) (Bear et al., 2006; Blackorby et al., 1991; Kortering & Braziel, 1999ab; McFarland et al., 2019). They use assignments to create an unfavorable environment for students. Unsuitable teachers turn an otherwise thrilling class into one in which students experience frustration. Some educators implicitly or explicitly engage in mental warfare with students, thus pushing them into emotional instability that makes their participation in learning activities and events complex. Such teachers make students feel deceived, and because of hurt, these students dropout out of school. These unmotivating teachers create a big social gap between them and students by not calling students by their names or discriminating against some students based on disability, gender, or other identities that are considered inferior. Students are made to feel as if they are nonexistent.

Some teachers find students irritating and directly or indirectly force them to drop their classes. Students who find teachers unfriendly soon lose interest in the class and, because of the poisoned learning environment, drop out of school to avoid being frustrated by biased teachers (Blackorby et al., 1991; Doren et al., 2014). Social barriers dampen students' spirits, and because of demotivation, these students drop out of school.

Therefore, there is a need for transformative educators capable of implementing best teaching practices informed by learners' needs, interests, and abilities (Sublett & Chang, 2019). School reform includes the transformation of educators. In particular, teachers need to gain knowledge in all realms, including face-to-face and online instruction. In particular, they need to gain experience in using the universal design of learning (UDL), social-emotional learning (SEL), and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) to support diverse learners. This would ensure they are experienced in delivering lessons that fit diverse learners' learning styles and, therefore, capable of addressing the learning needs of diverse learners (Sublett & Chang, 2019). Teachers must be instructors, *loco parentis*, coaches, and advocates for children and youth in their care (Kortering & Braziel, 1999b; Nittle, 2019; Peguero et al., 2018). High expectations of low-income students can improve the school atmosphere and reduce demotivating factors. Teachers must see all students, especially low-income families, through the asset-based perspective. Teachers should avoid sanctioning the belief that students from low-income families "aren't motivated" or "don't care" because they do not try to support them academically, emotionally, or socially. Falling susceptible to stereotypes and blaming impoverished people for being poor support the cycle of poverty.

Education programs must prepare teachers committed to the social justice and human rights of all learners and ensure that they are rewarded appropriately and proportional to their expertise and investment in the education of their students. Therefore, new incentives for teacher performance must encourage the recruitment of highly qualified teachers committed to advancing education for the betterment of education systems that value diverse students and prepare all for success in school and upon graduation.

### 6. Transformation of Stakeholders in Education

No individual, government, or entity can solely solve the education issues, let alone the school dropout problem. However, collaborating with various stakeholders is key to addressing ills in education, including school dropouts. It is the responsibility of everyone to control and address school dropouts. A collective approach is needed to make education accessible to all high school-age youth. Education is a human right. Therefore, communities, governments, and other entities must develop sound laws, policies, and practices that promote education for all (Blackorby et al., 1991; Doren et al., 2014; McMurrey, 2014; Pyle & Wexler, 2011). Laws and policies (e.g., the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965,

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997, No Child Left Behind Act 2001, and ESEA 2015) have worked differently in different states. Their impact has been varied, in some situations leading to problems that have exacerbated dropout of school-age children and youth and, in some cases, increased inclusion of learners with disabilities or from vulnerable groups (Bakken & Kortering, 1999; McMurrey, 2014; Plasman & Gottfried, 2018; Pyle & Wexler, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Stakeholders in education must eliminate unnecessary waste of school resources, unwarranted punishments of students and families, molestation of students or bullying of students and teachers, and other school staff.

Families are indispensable in making the education system work for their children. Family school engagement ensures the provision of resources and services and promotes their child's discipline because they are the first teacher and role models (Nittle, 2019; Vázquez-Nava et al., 2019). Parents and guardians must be at the forefront of instilling discipline in their children at individual levels so they can understand the consequences of behaviors and the need to conform to school and community rules necessary for social harmony. Students must value education and adhere to principles and morals that lead to their wellbeing. Parents must accept responsibility and participate in school meetings and conferences. Parents also should be accountable for helping their children with homework and acquiring complex work culture, attitudes, and discipline necessary to love themselves, others, and one's country. In addition, disabled people and their families must engage in disability advocacy to create awareness in society and champion their rights (Blackorby et al., 1991; Doren et al., 2014).

Collaboration of various stakeholders such as educators, administrators, policymakers, and service providers such as social workers and professors is vital in providing resources and services critical to making schools accessible and friendly to all learners. In addition, collaborations and partnerships allow stakeholders to educate themselves about students, families, schools, the impact of various circumstances on teaching and learning, and the consequences on students' schooling. In particular, home-school partnerships and teacher-parent reciprocal relationships are vital in understanding the impact of norms and practices on students and informing, planning, and instituting appropriate measures that directly and positively affect students' inclusion and belonging (Moll et al., 1992). Unfortunately, power is often skewed in favor of teachers in the school setting. Instead of a one-sided approach, partnerships allow communication and the exchange of ideas that benefit all players.

Higher education institutions, especially teacher preparatory programs, must be at the forefront of producing highly qualified educators. Supporting educators in the acquisition of expertise and pedagogical practices are necessary for them to make schools welcoming to all students to realize their dreams.

There is a significant improvement in the education of children with special needs. Still, millions of children with disabilities do not have access to quality education, thus

predisposing them to failure in school through adulthood. Both the governments and private sectors must be instrumental in changing the deficit culture and dismantling barriers that hinder the population of disabled people from participating in schools and communities. Already, there are different organizations dedicated to addressing school dropouts in America. For example, the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPCE) and the National Dropout Prevention Network (NDPN) provide resources and services, including information to those engaged in supporting vulnerable young people (<https://dropoutprevention.org/who-we-are/our-mission/>). NDPCE and NDPN work to improve opportunities for children and youth to fully develop their academic, social, work, and healthy life skills to graduate high school and lead productive lives. They do this by promoting awareness of successful programs and policies related to dropout prevention. Still, a lot remains to be done, so other organizations must collaborate in investing in the education sector. Therefore, all stakeholders must be involved in promoting education as a human right to ensure high schools and quality education are accessible to youth below the age of 24.

## LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Dropout issues exist globally at all levels of schooling, yet this study focused on the USA high school context. Therefore, results may not represent the dropout trends in different schools and regions worldwide. Hence, a comparative study is needed to compare the drop-out trends globally. More studies are required to focus on high school dropout rates in America to identify the impact on learners and their families. Acquiring additional information on ways that threaten American society should also be addressed. A comparison study of high-income countries' high school dropout measures is also needed. Besides, more studies should compare high-income and low-income countries to understand the impact of out-of-school on communities and nations. Such knowledge may inform solutions in different regions.

## CONCLUSION

School dropouts impede individuals and society by lowering their security. All stakeholders in education, including students, families, lawmakers, and educators, must implement education systems that work for everyone. Every citizen should be compelled to participate in making education accessible to all. The reformation of the education system and the transformation of individuals is essential in ensuring that all children and youth, especially vulnerable populations, access quality education. Hence, they will be career ready for the neo-liberalized globalized economic structure. Since dropping out of school is refuting education, there is a need to instill values in the education system that appreciates every citizen's talents, irrespective of their background. Therefore, communities and

governments should provide accessible material and supports for all children and youth to access, participate, and complete education and meet new goals to the best of their abilities.

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### *Author(s)' statements on ethics and conflict of interest*

*Ethics statement:* We, Theodoto Ressa and Allyson Andrews, hereby declare that research/publication ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of the study. We take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

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