

# What Happens to Dropouts Who Reenroll?

BethAnn Berliner  
WestEd  
bberlin@wested.org

Vanessa X. Barrat  
WestEd  
vbarrat@wested.org

Anthony B. Fong  
WestEd  
tfong@wested.org

Paul B. Shirk  
San Bernardino City Unified School District  
paul.shirk@sbcusd.k12.ca.us

---

*This study follows a cohort of first-time ninth graders over five years in San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBCUSD) to describe the magnitude of its dropout problem and the numbers, characteristics, and graduation outcomes of the dropouts who subsequently reenrolled in the district. Additionally, it documents reenrollment issues expressed by district staff and reenrollees. In 2001/02, there were 3,856 first-time ninth grade students enrolled in SBCUSD high schools. By 2005/06, 45.0 percent earned regular high school diplomas, and 35.1 percent dropped out at least once during the five years. Notably, dropping out is not necessarily a permanent outcome, and among the dropouts, 31.0 percent eventually reenrolled in district high schools. The enrollment data show that the majority of reenrollees dropped out in their first year of high school, and that nearly half returned to school for only one year. It also shows variation in student characteristics with ninth grade, Black, non English Language Learners, and female dropouts reenrolling at higher rates than others. The evidence*

*also indicates that while reenrollees fared better academically before dropping out than permanent dropouts, most, upon reenrollment, did not earn enough credits to graduate. Nevertheless, 18.4 percent of reenrollees earned a district high school diploma by 2005/06. The study also documents what district staff and reenrollees say about policies and practices to improve graduation outcomes for dropouts who return to school. By focusing on reenrollees, this study contributes to shaping policy responses to address the broader dropout challenge.*

In 2005/06 an estimated 1.2 million American students did not complete high school with their classmates (National High School Center, 2007; Pinkus, 2006). While there has been considerable recent research (for example, Orfield, 2004) on this national education crisis, much less is known about the number and characteristics of those students who drop out and then reenroll but face nearly impenetrable barriers to graduation. This study focuses on reenrollees in one of California's largest school districts – the San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBCUSD). It combines secondary analyses of student demographic, enrollment, and course-history data with interviews of reenrollees and district staff to reveal the magnitude of the dropout problem and the characteristics and graduation outcomes of the dropouts who reenrolled in district high schools between 2001/02 and 2005/06.

California's graduation rate mirrors the national rate. According to the most recent National Center for Education Statistics data available, the averaged freshman graduation rate of public high school students in 2003/04 was 73.9 percent in California and 75.0 percent nationwide (Laird, DeBell, Kienzl, & Chapman, 2007). In California low graduation rates are especially troubling among American Indian students (49.7 percent), Black students (55.3 percent), and Hispanic students (57.0 percent). In many urban districts, including San Bernardino, these groups have a less than 50 percent chance of graduating (De Cos, 2005).

The extensive literature on dropouts has focused largely on calculating dropout and graduation rates, predicting high school failure and dropout, and evaluating prevention programs. Critical information gaps still exist (Orfield, 2004). As the Waymans studies (2002, 2001) report, there is little research on returning dropouts, their rate of on-time diploma attainment, and the challenges districts face when student dropouts return to school. Data limitations largely account for this information gap and restrict longitudinal investigations of individual students as they entered and exited schools. A further complication was tracking reenrollees as they transferred between schools, districts, and even education systems, including adult education and community colleges.

Currently, there is no national or California accounting of the number of dropouts who reenroll in high school in either their district of origin (where they dropped out) or another district. Some studies on returning dropouts estimate reenrollment and graduation rates based on retrospective survey data. For instance, Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock (1987), using the High School and Beyond dataset for 1980-82, found that 17 percent of their sample returned to an education institution. Chuang (1997), using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth dataset, estimated that nearly 50 percent of the dropouts in the sample for 1979-86 reenrolled by 1986. Using the National Education Longitudinal Study dataset, Hurst, Kelly, and Princiotta (2004) reported that 40 percent of dropouts earned a high school diploma or alternative certificate within eight years of their cohort's expected graduation year.

By examining reenrollees, this study better enables educators and policymakers to understand the dropout problem. It describes the 2001/02 grade 9 cohort in SBCUSD by tracking student dropout, reenrollment, and graduation over five years, adding the increasing common fifth year to the conventional on-time four-year timeframe. Additionally, it

documents the issues the district confronted in reenrolling students who missed weeks, months, even years of schooling. SBCUSD provides a large, urban, high poverty and diverse setting for exploratory research, and this study of one district offers findings on which future research can build.

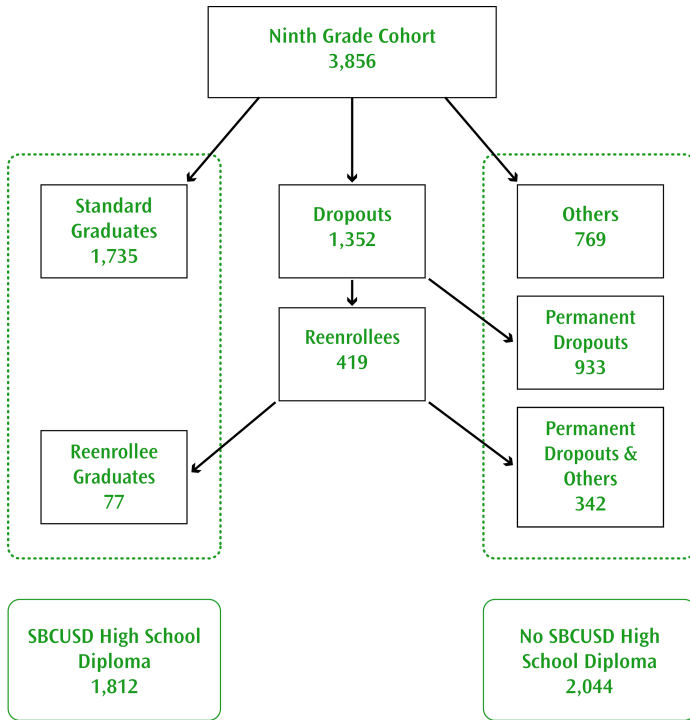
Five research questions guided this study of the reenrollment of dropouts in the SBCUSD between 2001/02 and 2005/06.

**1. What is the magnitude of reenrollment?**

In 2001/02 there were 3,856 first-time grade 9 students enrolled in SBCUSD high schools (figure 1). Five years later, 1,735 of these students (45.0 percent) had been continuously enrolled in district high schools and had earned regular high school diplomas. But for 1,352 students, more than one third of this grade 9 cohort (35.1 percent) high school was interrupted by at least one dropout event.

Dropping out of high school was not necessarily a permanent outcome (Wayman, 2001; Chuang, 1997). Among the dropouts, 419 (31.0 percent) eventually reenrolled in a SBUCSD high school, and 77 (5.7 percent) graduated from a district high school by 2005/06.

**A. Figure 1. Student trajectories**



## 2. What are the characteristics of reenrollees?

This study reports on the personal and academic reasons why students dropped out and reenrolled in high school. In interviews reenrollees described both “push” and “pull” factors that motivated their dropout and return to school. They told of school experiences that push students out of school before graduation—academic struggles, boredom, and limited ways to make up failed course credits—or life circumstances that pull them in directions that stall completion—family crises, employment, pregnancy and gang pressure. These factors were documented in the research literature (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison 2006; Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson 2004; Rumberger, 2004; Jordan, McPartland, & Lara 1999). In contrast, the literature does not document the reasons why dropouts reenroll in high school. The reenrollees in this study recounted

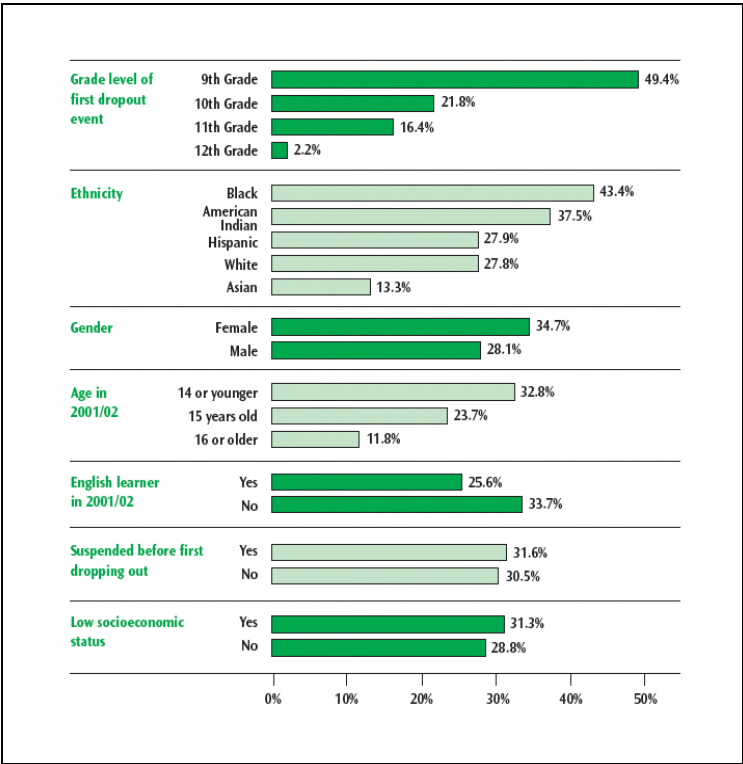
that without a diploma dropouts are often pushed out of the labor market, motivating them to reenroll in school. And principals, teachers, sports coaches, and counselors helped to pull dropouts back to high school by offering to immediately reenroll them in school and by providing counseling and academic assistance on their return.

Reenrollment rates were assessed by various student background characteristics (figure 2). Of particular interest, low reenrollment rates were found for Hispanic students (27.9 percent), English language learners (25.6 percent), ninth graders older than age 14 (23.7 percent for students 15 years old and 11.8 percent for students 16 years and older) and male students (28.1 percent) even though these subgroups were also more likely to drop out than other students. For these subgroups, low reenrollment rates meant that dropout events became permanent exits from SBCUSD high schools during the period covered by the study.

In contrast, the highest reenrollment rates were found for grade 9 dropouts (49.4 percent), Black dropouts (43.4 percent), female dropouts (34.7 percent), and student dropouts not classified as English language learners (33.7 percent). The higher reenrollment rates, especially for grade 9 and Black student dropouts, demonstrate how dropout events can be a temporary interruption rather than a permanent high school outcome.

The reenrollment rates showed less variability by suspension and low socioeconomic status than by the other characteristics analyzed, staying close to the overall 31.0 percent reenrollment rate of the study cohort.

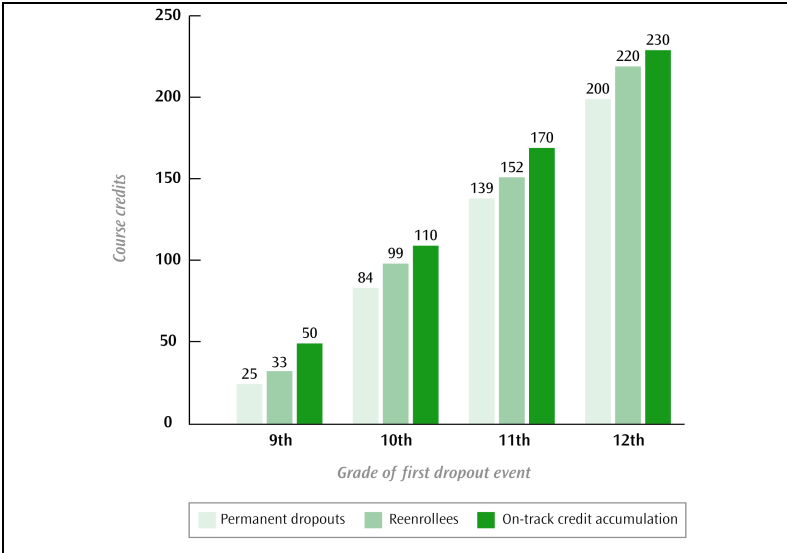
## **Figure 2. Reenrollment rates**



### 3. What are the academic and graduation outcomes for reenrollees?

The evidence also indicates that while reenrollees fared better than permanent dropouts before the first dropout event, most did not earn enough course credits upon reenrollment to graduate within the five years of the study. At the time of the first dropout event students who later reenrolled in the district had accumulated more course credits than students who had dropped out permanently (figure 3). Specifically, among student who dropped out for the first time in grade 9, those who eventually reenrolled had accumulated an average of 33 credits at the time of the dropout event as opposed to 25 credits for permanent dropouts —50 credits are needed to advance to grade 10. This pattern remained consistent across all grade levels.

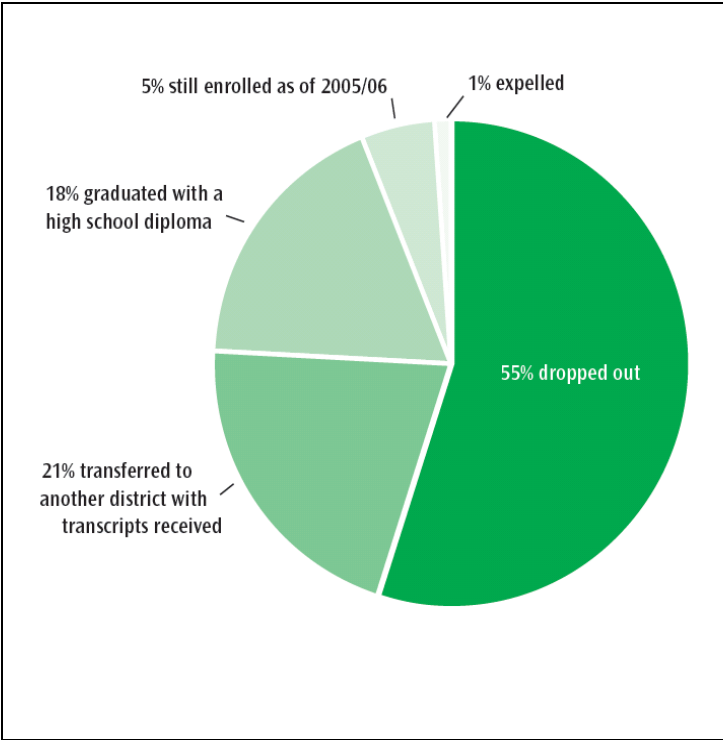
**Figure 3. Credit accumulation**



After reenrollment, one-third of reenrollees failed to complete even one course and most did not earn enough credits to graduate. Nevertheless, 419 (18 percent) of the SBCUSD reenrollees obtained a high school diploma within four or five years (figure 4).

**Figure 4. Reenrollee outcomes**





**4. What issues did the district confront regarding reenrollment of dropouts?**

District staff reported a strong commitment to reenrolling dropouts but cited practical challenges or disincentives to reenrollment. They noted the lack of credit-recovery interventions for credit-deficient students at traditional high schools. Interventions are needed to enable students to accumulate credits lost due to course failures, to accelerate credit accrual to advance grades, and to meet requirements for graduation. While these interventions were available at continuation high schools, demand to enroll in these schools exceeded the district’s capacity to serve students requesting a transfer from traditional high schools or reenrolling following a dropout event. Funding concerns were

especially pressing on the district and high schools. State funds, tied to enrollment and attendance rates, were reduced as a result of the unstable enrollment and attendance of dropouts and reenrollees. District staff also explained that the poor attendance of reenrollees—and the likelihood that they will drop out again—made it difficult to meet specific testing, graduation, and other accountability requirements.

## **5. What do district staff and students suggest for changes in policies and practices?**

There are no simple solutions to the dropout problem and reenrollment challenge. Among the considerations for changes in policies and practices identified by the district staff and students were:

- Increase district capacity to offer credit-recovery options at both traditional and continuation high schools;
- Enroll credit-deficient students early in rapid recovery interventions;
- Target additional funds and interventions to follow reenrollees to the schools where they return; and
- Adjust the dropout rate formula so schools are not penalized for students with multiple dropout events.

In conclusion, the research on high school dropouts is virtually silent on reenrollees. Assessing the magnitude of reenrollment and the characteristics of students who vanish from and then reenroll in the education pipeline will provide critical information about how well schools first retain students and then graduate them after they return. A more complete and accurate national description of reenrollees is needed to shape policies and practices that enable high school dropouts to reenroll and graduate.

## References

- Bridgeland, J., DiIulio, J., & Morison, K. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprise, LLC.
- Chuang, H. (1997). High school youths' dropout and re-enrollment behavior. *Economics of Education Review*, 16(2), 171–186.
- De Cos, P. (2005). *High school dropouts, enrollment, and graduation rates in California*. Sacramento, CA: California Research Bureau.
- Ekstrom, R., Goertz, M., Pollack, J., & Rock, D. (1987). Who drops out of high school and why? In G. Natriello (Ed.), *School dropouts: Patterns and policies* (pp. 52–88). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hurst, D., Kelly, D., & Princiotta, D. (2004). *Educational attainment of high school dropouts 8 years later* (NCES 2005-026). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- Jordan, W., McPartland, J., & Lara, J. (1999). Rethinking the causes of high school dropouts. *The Prevention Researcher*, 6(3), 1–4.
- Laird, J., DeBell, M., Kienzl, G., & Chapman, C. (2007). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2005* (NCES 2007-059). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved December 12, 2007, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>
- Lehr, C., Johnson, D., Bremer, C., Cosio, A., & Thompson, M. (2004). *Essential tools: Increasing rates of school completion: Moving from policy and research to practice*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- National High School Center. (2007, August). *State approaches to more reliable and uniform dropout and graduation data*. Retrieved September 21, 2007, from [http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC\\_GradRatesvsDropoutRates\\_August2007.pdf](http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_GradRatesvsDropoutRates_August2007.pdf)
- Orfield, G. (Ed.). (2004). *Dropouts in America: Confronting*

- the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pinkus, L. (2006). *Who's counted? Who's counting? Understanding high school graduation rates*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellence in Education.
- Rumberger, R. (2004). Why students drop out of school. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 131–155). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wayman, J. (2001, February). Factors influencing GED and diploma attainment of high school dropouts. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 9(4), [online]. <http://olan.ed.asu.edu/epaa/v9n4>
- Wayman, J. (2002, January/February). The utility of educational resilience for studying degree attainment in school dropouts. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 95(3), 167–177.