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CHAPTER 11

What Can Be Done to Reduce the Dropout Rate?

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What can be done to design and implement effective dropout intervention strategies? The review of the research literature in the earlier chapter, "Why Students Drop Out of School," suggests several approaches. First, because dropping out is influenced by both individual and institutional factors, intervention strategies can focus on either or both sets of factors. For example, intervention strategies can address the individual values, attitudes, and behaviors that are associated with dropping out without attempting to alter the characteristics of the families, schools, and communities that may contribute to those individual factors. Many dropout prevention programs pursue such programmatic strategies by providing would-be dropouts with additional resources and supports to help them stay in school. Alternatively, intervention strategies can focus on attempting to improve the environmental contexts of potential dropouts by providing resources and supports to strengthen or restructure their families, schools, and communities. Such systemic strategies are often part of larger efforts to improve the educational and social outcomes of at-risk students more generally. Both strategies are discussed in more detail below.

Second, because dropping out is associated with both academic and social problems, effective prevention strategies must focus on both arenas. That is, if dropout-prevention strategies are going to be effective, they must be comprehensive by providing resources and supports in all areas of students' lives. And because dropouts leave school for a variety of reasons, services provided them must be flexible and tailored to their individual needs.

Third, because the problematic attitudes and behaviors of students at risk of dropping out appear as early as elementary school, dropout-prevention strategies can and should begin early in a child's educational career. Dropout-prevention programs often target high school or middle school students who may have already experienced years of educational failure or unsolved problems.

Similarly, dropout-recovery programs that begin in middle or high school must attempt to overcome longstanding problems in order to get dropouts to complete school. Consequently, such programs may be costly and ineffective. Conversely, early intervention may be the most powerful and cost-effective approach to dropout prevention.

The overall conclusion is that there are a variety of potentially effective approaches and strategies for designing dropout interventions. Given that conclusion, what evidence do we have of the effectiveness of alternative approaches?

Unfortunately, the evidence on the effectiveness of dropout interventions is generally weak for two fundamental reasons. First, there have been relatively few rigorous evaluations of dropout-intervention programs. For example, the General Accounting Office surveyed more than 1,000 dropout programs in the fall of 1986, yet it found only 20 rigorous evaluations of the 479 programs that responded to the survey (U.S. GAO, 1987). Second, the evaluations that do exist often fail to demonstrate program effectiveness (see ch. 12). Similarly, Slavin and Fashola (1998) conducted a literature search of dropout-prevention programs with rigorous, experimental evaluations and found only two that were effective.

Despite the dearth of research evidence, case studies of proven or at least promising approaches do exist. These case studies not only provide examples of both programmatic and systemic approaches to dropout prevention, but have also identified some of the features that have contributed to their effectiveness.

PROGRAMMATIC APPROACHES

There are two programmatic approaches to dropout prevention. One approach is to provide supplemental services to students within an existing school program. The second approach is to provide an alternative school program either within an existing school (school within a school) or in a separate facility (alternative school). Neither approach attempts to change existing institutions serving most students; instead they create alternative programs or institutions to target students who are somehow identified as being at risk of dropping out.

Supplemental Programs

One example of a supplemental yet comprehensive programmatic approach to dropout prevention is the Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success or ALAS program (Cándata, Larson, Melian, & Rumberger, 1998). ALAS was developed, implemented, and evaluated as a pilot intervention program to serve the most at-risk students in a poor, predominantly Latino middle school in the Los Angeles area from 1990 to 1995.

The program specifically targeted two groups of high-risk students: special education students and other students who, because of poor academic performance, misbehavior, and low income, were at greatest risk of school failure. The pilot program served two cohorts of special education students (77 total) and one cohort of 46 high-risk students. Participating students received the intervention program in conjunction with the regular school program for all three years they remained in the target school.

ALAS was founded on the premise that youths and their school, family, and community contexts must all be addressed simultaneously for dropout-prevention efforts to succeed. Thus, ALAS consisted of a series of specific intervention strategies focused on individual adolescents and on these three contexts of influence on achievement: the family, the school, and the community. The intervention strategies were designed to increase the effectiveness of factors in each context and increase collaboration between them. ALAS provided the following specific interventions:

1. Remediation of students' ineffective problem-solving skills regarding social interactions and task performance through ten weeks of problem-solving instruction and two years of follow-up problem-solving training and counseling.
2. Personal recognition and bonding activities, such as praise, outings, recognition ceremonies, certificates, and positive home calls to parents to discuss meeting goals or improving student behavior to increase self-esteem, affiliation, and a sense of belonging with the school organization.
3. Intensive attendance monitoring, including period-by-period attendance records and daily follow-ups with parents, to communicate a personal interest in students' attendance.
4. Frequent teacher feedback to parents and students regarding classroom comportment, missed assignments, and missing homework.
5. Direct instruction and modeling for parents on how to reduce their child's inappropriate or undesirable behavior and how to increase desirable behavior.
6. Integration of school and home needs with community services.

The program was evaluated using an experimental design in which high-risk students were randomly assigned to the treatment or a control group, and participating special education students were compared to a previous year's cohort of special education students. The evaluation examined enrollment status and credits earned in ninth grade, the final year of the program, and in the remaining years of high school after the program ended. Evaluation data on mobility, attendance, failed classes, and graduation credits indicate that the ALAS program had a substantial and practical impact on students who received the

intervention (Cándara et al., 1998). By the end of ninth grade, students in the comparison group had twice the number of failed classes, were four times more likely to have excessive absences, and were twice as likely to be seriously behind in high school graduation credits. These results appear even more remarkable when noting that the participants in this study represent the most difficult-to-teach students within a pool generally viewed as high risk. Nonetheless, these dramatic effects were not sustained. By the end of twelfth grade, only 32 percent of the ALAS participants and 27 percent of the comparison students had completed high school. This clearly suggests that in order to increase graduation rates, an ALAS-type intervention must be provided throughout the high school years.

Is there any evidence that interventions in elementary school or preschool could have long-term, sustained effects in reducing dropout rates in secondary school? For example, since grade retention is a powerful predictor of dropping out of school, programs that reduce the incidence of retention should help reduce the dropout rate. Recent reviews based on rigorous, experimental evaluations identified several preschool programs that have been shown to reduce high school dropout rates (Currie, 2001; Karoly et al., 1998).

One such preschool program is the High/Scope Perry Pre-School program (Barnett, 1995). The program targeted 123 African Americans born in poverty who were at high risk of failing in school. At ages 3 and 4, the children were randomly divided into a program group who received a high-quality preschool program based on High/Scope's active learning approach, and a comparison group who received no preschool program. In the study's most recent phase, 95 percent of the original study participants were interviewed at age 27. Additional data were gathered from the subjects' school, social services, and arrest records.

The program evaluation found a wide range of social and economic benefits, including reduced crime rates, higher earnings, and reduced welfare dependency. In terms of education, those who received the preschool program were a third more likely than those who received no preschool education to graduate from regular or adult high school or to receive General Education Development (GED) certification (71 percent versus 54 percent). These outcomes are quite remarkable, considering that they occurred 13 years or more after the intervention ended. They suggest that early interventions for students at risk of dropping out can be effective.

Alternative Programs

The other programmatic approach to dropout prevention is to create alternative school programs that target only students at risk of dropping out. These programs can either operate within regular schools or as separate, alternative

schools. They generally provide a complete education program, but one that represents an alternative to that offered in regular, comprehensive schools. In addition, they typically provide many of the other support services that are found in supplemental programs.

There have been several evaluations of effective alternative programs: Stern and colleagues (Stern, Davton, Paik, Weisberg, & Evans, 1988) evaluated eleven within-school academy programs in California high schools; Wehlage et al. (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989) evaluated twelve alternative and two comprehensive schools; and Dynarski and Gleason (1998) evaluated three within-school programs and six alternative schools. Although the programs differed in the types of students they enrolled, the curricula and services they provided, and the ways they were structured, there appear to be several common features among effective programs:

- a nonthreatening environment for learning
- a caring and committed staff who accept a personal responsibility for student success
- a school culture that encourages staff risk-taking, self-governance, and professional collegiality
- a school structure that provides for a low student-teacher ratio and a small class size to promote student engagement

These reviews clearly illustrate that it is possible to create effective alternative programs to address the needs and promote the learning of students at risk of dropping out. Yet creating successful alternative programs presents a number of challenges. First, programs can have difficulty in attracting students because of negative perceptions by students, parents, and educators that such schools are a dumping ground for "bad" students and that they symbolize the failure of the regular system (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998). Some programs have responded to this problem by restricting entry to more motivated at-risk students, which raises questions about the purpose of such schools. Second, because of their low regard, such programs often have a hard time competing for resources with regular school programs.

SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

Systemic solutions have the potential to reduce the risk of dropping out for a much larger number of students by improving some of the environmental factors in families, schools, and communities that contribute to dropout behavior. That was the position taken by the National Research Council Panel on High-Risk Youth (1993), which argued:

The primary institutions that serve youth—health, schools, employment, training—are crucial and we must begin with helping them respond more effectively to contemporary adolescent needs. Effective responses will involve pushing the boundaries of these systems, encouraging collaborations between them and reducing the number of adolescents whose specialized problems cannot be met through primary institutions. (p. 193)

Although the promise of systemic solutions to the dropout problem is great, the reality is sobering. The reason is simply that systemic changes are extremely difficult to achieve because they involve making fundamental changes in the way institutions work, both individually and within the system of which they are a part. Despite the difficulty of making such changes, there are examples of effective institutional changes, particularly in schools that have been successful in improving the graduation rates of high-risk students.

One well-known example is Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) in New York City (van Hensden Hale, 2000). The school enrolls 450 public school students in grades 7 through 12, most of whom are from low-income families and many of whom have a history of average or below-average academic achievement. No selection criteria, tests, or interviews are required to attend the school, which is supported by public education funds. Costs per student are the same as other public high schools.

The school offers an intellectually rigorous and creative education normally associated with elite private schools. Classes are small, averaging 20 students, and the day is organized into two-hour periods, allowing teachers and students enough time to engage in concentrated work in specific areas. Students take two main subject groups: mathematics and science, and social studies and the humanities. The school offers both interdisciplinary college-preparatory courses and career-oriented apprenticeships. It has established high standards and clear expectations for its students. Student performance is regularly assessed through a process in which students explain their work and bear it criticized. To graduate, they must present seven academic projects in specified subjects over two years and defend them before committees of students, teachers, and other adults, much as a Ph.D. candidate defends a thesis.

The school has developed beneficial relationships with parents and the community, and has worked overtime to connect with and involve parents in the school and in their own child's schooling. School leaders have also formed a number of partnerships with community agencies. In addition, the school has a community service requirement where students spend one morning a week working in community service jobs.

According to CPESS codirector Brigitte Belletiere, four specific practices support the school's success:

- articulation and maintenance of a clear vision and mission that the staff carries out
- goal-setting in line with the vision
- allocation of instructional resources to keep class size small
- providing time for ongoing, job-embedded professional development

The school maintains its progress and continually improves itself through an internal democratic process. The staff develops curricula, assessments, and the criteria for earning a CPESS diploma. They are also held accountable for maintaining school standards.

Student achievement data documents the school's success. Only 5 percent of the students drop out during their high school years, and more than 90 percent of Central Park East's graduates go on to college. Students have high attendance rates and a low incidence of violence.

Case studies of other schools have been able to identify effective schools and describe the salient features that enable them to keep students enrolled and eventually graduate. These features are similar to those that have been identified for "effective" schools more generally (e.g., Newman, 1993; Purkey & Smith, 1985). While the list of specific features varies from one author to another (e.g., Newman, 1993; Purkey & Smith, 1985; Wehlage et al., 1989),³ they essentially address two basic features of schools: the commitment and competencies of the people (teachers, administrators, and staff) and the organizational structure (size, staffing ratio, curriculum design, services, etc.). While it remains unclear whether one feature must change before the other, both appear to be necessary. For example, simply adopting "progressive" structural changes, such as site-based management or team teaching, may do little if teachers do not have the requisite commitment and competencies (Newman, 1993). At the same time, certain organizational features, such as smaller school size and shared decision-making, may be necessary to develop and support teachers' commitment to the institution and to the students it serves (Wehlage et al., 1989). What also remains unclear is the extent to which it may be necessary to recruit teachers and staff with the necessary commitment and competencies before creating a supportive structure.⁴

Research has been able to identify the features of effective secondary schools. Yet while identifying such features is the first step in the school reform

process (Putney & Smith, 1985), the next step is much harder and thus far has excluded school reformers: *Identifying the resources, technical support, and incentives to transform or restructure existing schools in order to create those ineffective features.*⁴ Although a number of programs and policies have been instituted by local districts and state and federal governments to support school restructuring at the secondary level, these efforts have generally not had much success, especially in reducing dropout rates.

One study (Dynański & Gleason, 1998) suggests that it may be more difficult to transform existing institutions than to create new ones. This may be especially true when it comes to reducing dropout rates in urban high schools. In their study of 207 urban high schools that were attempting major school reform programs based on the effective schools literature, Louis and Miles (1990) found widespread improvement in a number of areas, such as student behavior and student and staff morale. But even among programs that had implemented their programs for several years and enjoyed improvements in student achievement, improvement in dropout rates was "rarely achieved no matter how long a program had been in operation" (Louis & Miles, 1990, p. 49).

While efforts to restructure secondary schools to reduce dropout rates have proved elusive, so too have efforts to reform other institutions that serve at-risk youth. One ambitious systemic reform effort was the New Futures Initiative, promoted and funded by the Annie E. Casey foundation beginning in 1988. New Futures was an attempt to build new collaborative structures among existing public and private institutions in five cities (Dayton, Ohio; Lawrence, Massachusetts; Little Rock, Arkansas; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Savannah, Georgia) to address the problems of at-risk youth, including dropping out of school. The key strategy was to establish an oversight collaborative in each city with representation from public and private sector agencies to "identify youth problems, develop strategies, and set timelines for addressing these problems, coordinate joint agency activities, and restructure educational and social services" (White & Weblage, 1995, p. 24). The collaboratives also included case managers who 1) brokered services among the disparate agencies serving at-risk youth and their families; 2) served as advocates for at-risk youth; and 3) served as the "eyes and ears" of the collaboratives by providing information and feedback to the group about what reforms were needed.

Evaluations of this ambitious, systemic reform effort found that it did little to reduce dropout rates and other problems of at-risk youth (Weblage, Smith, & Lipman, 1992; White & Weblage, 1995). White and Weblage (1995) found several generic problems in trying to establish community collaboration:

- *Slippage between policy and action* because case managers were generally unsuccessful in overcoming the "turf battles" among existing agencies and in getting collaboratives to address them;
- *Dissonance over reform policies* because of fundamental disagreements over the definitions, causes, and remedies to problems;
- *Disjuncture between policy and community conditions* because of the top-down organization of the collaboratives that resulted in an incomplete understanding of the problems and hence ineffective policies.

These problems, clearly evident in New Futures school reforms, paralleled those found in the earlier evaluation of restructured schools. In particular, "most educators in New Futures schools believed that the problems that created at-risk students were problems inside the students, not inside the school and its curriculum" (Weblage et al., 1992, p. 73). Hence, as found in the other systemic reform efforts, there was little incentive or support for changing the fundamental functioning of schools.

CONCLUSION

The United States does seem to have the capacity to reduce school dropouts and eliminate disparities among racial and ethnic groups, or at least has the potential to do so. Capacity requires technical expertise to develop and implement effective dropout-prevention and recovery programs. A number of program models have been developed, implemented, and evaluated to demonstrate this expertise. These program models range from early intervention programs serving preschool students, to supplemental yet comprehensive middle school programs, to alternative middle and high school programs.

But to achieve widespread improvement in the dropout problem requires both systemic and programmatic solutions. And here the expertise does not yet exist. While individual effective schools and their salient features have been identified, large-school systemic solutions to the dropout problem require resources, technical expertise, and incentives to restructure existing schools (Hanushek & Jorgenson, 1996). Such solutions have been tried, but have not succeeded.⁵ Research suggests why systemic reforms of schools and other agencies serving youth are problematic, but not how to address the problems. In their review of the New Futures initiative, White and Weblage (1995) in fact conclude that institutional change is too difficult, and instead argue for a strategy of building social capital among community members:

Given the goal of building social capital, the criteria for a successful collaborative would shift from delivering services more efficiently to success in fostering community. Social capital contributes to community by fostering networks of interdependency within and among families, neighborhoods, and the larger community. In building social capital, successful collaborators will change the role of social service institutions. Resources held by agencies will go to building networks of support that are integral to families and neighborhoods. The shift from delivering services to individual clients to investing in the social capital of whole groups of people appears to be essential if collaborators are to ultimately improve the life chances of generations of at-risk children. (p. 35)

While this approach may appear worthwhile as a way of more effectively challenging resources and providing support to the institutions that serve at-risk youth, the approach is yet unproven. Moreover, it still requires a commitment of resources sufficient to substantially improve the lives of children and families.

This gets to the issue of political will. Does the United States have the political will to invest the resources to substantially reduce dropout rates and eliminate disparities among racial and ethnic groups? The answer appears to be no. One reason for this conclusion is that even programmatic solutions that have proved to be both effective and cost-effective have not been successful in attracting widespread funding. For example, the Perry Pre-School program has been shown to provide social benefits in excess of seven times program costs, yet the United States has yet to fully support preschool services for low-income youth (Barnett, 1995). And despite several decades of school finance reform to eliminate disparities in the funding of public schools, widespread disparities still exist (e.g., Betts, Rueben, & Danenberg, 2000; Kozol, 1991).

Without eliminating disparities in the resources of families, schools, and communities, it is also unlikely that the United States will ever eliminate disparities in dropout rates among racial and ethnic groups. And those disparities may be more difficult to eliminate in the face of increasing racial and ethnic segregation of America's schools (Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Eide, 1997).

NOTES

1. This chapter is the second part of Chapter 6, "Why Students Drop Out of School."
2. Purkey and Smith (1985) generated a list of 13 features of effective schools that are necessary to change the culture of the school. Newman (1993) identified a list of four commitments and competencies required of teachers, along with a list of four ideas that he describes as a "house theory about what is needed to make substantial changes in the current

educational system" (p. 9). Weblage et al. (1989) describes a series of qualities in the school staff, the culture, and the structure of successful dropout-prevention schools.

3. One issue that is rarely discussed in the literature on effective schools is the extent to which teachers are recruited and selected into effective schools. A private conversation with the principal of Central Park East revealed that teachers in that school are interviewed and selected based on a desired set of commitments and competencies, even though the school provides ongoing professional development for its teachers. The selection of teachers may be especially important regarding the belief that all students can and should succeed in school.

4. See Haanushiek and Jorgensen (1996) for a discussion of incentives.
5. Chicago has probably come closest to achieving large school systemic reform, although widespread variation exists in the extent of meaningful reform (see Hess, 1993).

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CHAPTER 12

Interpreting the Evidence from Recent Federal Evaluations of Dropout-Prevention Programs: The State of Scientific Research

MARK DYNARSKI

Beginning in the late 1980s, the U.S. Department of Education conducted three extensive evaluations of the effectiveness of programs to reduce high school dropout rates. The programs and the evaluations were supported by funds from the Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act and two phases of the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP), one operating from 1989 to 1991, the other from 1991 to 1996. Together, the three evaluations studied more than 100 dropout-prevention programs, and rigorous evaluation designs were used for 30 of these programs. There have been very few large-scale evaluations of solutions to the dropout problem.

Findings from the three evaluations show that most programs did not reduce dropout rates by statistically significant amounts, but some programs did improve some outcomes: three programs (funded in the second phase of the SDDAP) that prepared students who had already dropped out to get the General Education Development certificate improved GED completion rates; an alternative high school on a community college campus reduced dropout rates; and several alternative middle schools reduced dropout rates.

The three evaluations were broad-ranging studies, two of which relied on random assignment techniques to measure program effects reliably. Considering the extent and rigor of these evaluations, it is reasonable to ask whether their findings comprise a menu of program approaches that a policymaker or education program developer could use to select an effective dropout-prevention program for their school or district.