

What Happens to High School Dropouts Who Reenroll?

In 2005/06, an estimated 1.2 million American students did not complete high school with their classmates. While much media and research literature focus on high school dropouts, little is known about those who reenroll and the obstacles these students face to graduate. For many policymakers, this is an overlooked population. Understanding their challenges, demographics, reenrollment histories, and outcomes can provide critical information to shape national and local policies and practices that address their needs.

A new report¹ prepared by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd tracks a cohort of first-time ninth graders in the San Bernardino City Unified School District over five years. It describes the scope of the district's dropout problem and the numbers, characteristics, and graduation outcomes of those who reenrolled, as well as the challenges the district faces once students reenter the system. The study, "Reenrollment of high school dropouts in a large, urban school district," documents what district staff and reenrollees say about policies and practices to improve graduation outcomes for dropouts who return to school.

A National Crisis Mirrored in California's Seventh Largest Urban School District

- » California's graduation rate mirrors the national picture. Based on the most recent NCES data, the averaged freshman graduation rates of public high school students in 2003/04 was 73.9% in California and 75% nationally.
- » In California, minority graduation rates are especially troubling: American Indians (49.7%); Blacks (55.3%); and Hispanics (57%).
- » San Bernardino City Unified School District is California's seventh largest urban school district and, as in many of the state's urban districts, these same minorities have a less than 50% chance of graduating.

What the study found:

- » Dropping out is not necessarily a permanent outcome: About one third of San Bernardino City Unified School District dropouts reenrolled in district schools.
- » Reenrollment rates were lowest for Asian students, who also had the lowest dropout rate.
- » Hispanic, English language learner, and male students had high dropout rates but were less likely to reenroll than other students, resulting in higher rates of permanent exits.
- » Ninth grade and Black students were more likely to drop out and more likely to reenroll than other students, resulting in higher rates of temporary enrollment interruptions.
- » The majority of reenrollees dropped out for the first time in the ninth grade.
- » Over half of reenrollees returned to school for only one year.

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- » Before dropping out, reenrollees earned on average more course credits than dropouts who didn't return to school but less than students on track to graduate.
- » Ultimately 18.4% of reenrollees earned a district high school diploma by 2005/06.

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Despite a strong commitment to reenroll dropouts, San Bernardino City Unified School District staff reported facing several practical challenges or disincentives to reenrollment. They included funding concerns and low capacity for offering course-credit recovery interventions. In addition, state funds tied to enrollment and attendance rates were reduced because of student dropouts and reenrollments. Further, some testing, graduation, and other accountability requirements are adversely affected by the poor attendance of reenrollees and the likelihood that they will drop out again.

Methodology: Study Data and Analyses

This mixed methods descriptive study used these data and analyses:

- » Linked, longitudinal student-level data including demographic, enrollment, and course-history information for every year of the study
- » Interviews with district administrators, high school principals, and dropouts currently reenrolled in various district high schools

- » Reenrollment and dropout rates, computed by gender, ethnicity, English learner status, low economic status, age of entering the ninth grade, and suspension
- » Course history and grade data allowed for reporting on course failure and credit accumulation
- » Interview content analysis provided detailed descriptions and explanations of the reasons students dropped and reenrolled, and the challenges for students, schools, and districts

Policy Considerations

There are no simple solutions to the dropout problem and reenrollment challenge. Among the key considerations identified by San Bernardino City Unified School District staff and students for changes in policies and practices:

- » 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;
- » Coordinate course-credit accrual plans for individual reenrollees; and
- » Adjust the dropout rate formula so schools are not penalized for students with multiple dropout events.

¹ Berliner, B., Barrat, V.X., Fong, A.B., & Shirk, P.B. (2008). *Reenrollment of high school dropouts in a large, urban school district* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2008-No. 056). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West.

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