

Once a Dropout, Not Always a Dropout

For years researchers have painted a statistical portrait of high school dropouts — which demographic groups do better or worse, at which grade levels they are most likely to fail, and how leaving school prematurely affects the future behaviors and earnings of adults. These and other trends provide a retrospective on American students who don't obtain a high school diploma. But until recently, researchers have ignored the story of what happens to high school dropouts who return to school.

How many teenage dropouts eventually return to school, and why? Which students drop out permanently and which ones reenroll? And what results do the returning students achieve during the conventional four- or five-year time frame for high school graduation?


A new study from the Regional Educational Laboratory West at WestEd focuses on these students who have moved in the shadows of the education system. The research offers some surprising details to our understanding of the transitions that young people make — or fail to make — as they navigate through school. The study also reveals important lessons for education leaders and policymakers who seek to address the broader dropout problem throughout the country.

"What we've discovered is that dropping out is not always a permanent outcome," said BethAnn Berliner, a senior research associate who directed the study along with colleagues Vanessa Barrat and Tony Fong in partnership with Paul B. Shirk of the San Bernardino City Unified School District in California. "When these students fall off the rosters, they don't disappear. They don't even necessarily leave their communities. They are retrievable. And when they return, we need to do a better job of making sure they are successful."

Causes for Leaving; Ways to Pull Them Back

The WestEd study tracked 9th graders in the large, urban, and racially diverse San Bernardino school system over five years and discovered that 35 percent had dropped out at least once during that time frame. The figures are consistent with state and national averages. Most of the students disconnected during the first year of high school, revealing missteps during the critical transition period from middle school to high school. Through interviews with students and school staff, researchers identified a series of "push" factors that caused the teenagers to leave school before graduation, including academic struggles, boredom, and limited ways to make up failed course credits. But other push factors had to do with life circumstances, such as pregnancy, gang pressure, and needing to work to help support families.

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Despite these challenges, nearly one-third eventually reenrolled in high school. Researchers identified a series of "pull" factors that drew the students back to school. The primary reason was the inability to find employment without a diploma. Yet students also said they were often motivated to return because of the concern of school staff.

"Kids were telling us it was the wrestling coach, it was the principal, it was the attendance officer they bumped into at a convenience store who said, 'We love you, we miss you, we'll do whatever it takes' to help you get back," Berliner explained. "Caring came out as sort of a premium thing in terms of luring people back. Kids wanted to go where people knew their life stories, where people were non-judgmental and were trying to help them deal with their lives."

Returning Students Need More Support

Once they returned to school, however, students generally encountered many of the problems that caused them to drop out in the first place and few of the supports that would enable them to stay. Because of limited counseling and academic options, students tried to play catch-up without a realistic plan or a coordinated strategy of interventions and course credit recovery within the school system. Of the dropouts who returned to school, only 18 percent graduated within the five-year time period of the study.

"Getting them to reenroll in school is not the weak link," Berliner says. "The weak link is helping them gain traction and succeed once they return."


In addition to making academic courses more engaging and relevant, Berliner says, schools and school districts need to establish early warning systems that will identify struggling students and offer them a range of supports. Strategies that have worked include 9th grade academies that separate new students from older ones; double course periods that let students get grade-level instruction in core subjects while they simultaneously receive remediation to close skill gaps; and counselors who actively monitor risk factors like poor attendance, low test scores, and family crises, and then direct these students to appropriate tutoring, study skills courses, and social services.

The Role of Policy and Research

Berliner says state and federal policymakers can help by creating financial incentives for schools to reclaim dropouts and get them to graduate. Current accountability systems often penalize schools when their students drop out and reenroll multiple times or retake and fail state exit exams.

More research also is needed at the national level to track the path of current high school dropouts in an effort to explain why only about two-thirds of the middle and high school students who say they expect to graduate and go on to college actually achieve that goal.

"The chasm between aspiration and attainment is big," Berliner says. "When you talk to these reenrolled dropouts, you find that every single one aspires to earn a diploma. They don't aspire



to a GED. They don't aspire to dig ditches for a living. They want to walk across the stage with cap and gown. They work hard to envision themselves being successful. But when they lose that vision because they can't see that it will happen, because they can never catch up, they lose hope and just leave again."

The full study, *Reenrollment of High School Dropouts in a Large, Urban School District*, is part of the Issues & Answers research series published by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.

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