

What Have Our Drop-Outs Learned?

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A striking conclusion of the Illinois holding power study, as presented in this article, is that many youths who withdraw from school are labeled as "failures" even before they enter high school. Such a finding points to the necessity for expanded and improved counseling services.

MOST discussions of guidance in the public schools are quite naturally concerned with providing better service for the pupils in those schools. But the needs of in-school children and youth can furnish only a partial basis for attacking guidance problems, for in a large number of schools more than half the schools' potential clients are no longer present by the time the high school seniors graduate.

The magnitude of this problem—the problem of the children *not* in school—is brought out by a circular of the U. S. Office of Education which reports that of every 100 children enrolled in the fifth grade in 1938-39, 20 dropped out before entering the ninth grade and 38 more withdrew before high school graduation eight years later. Forty-two of the original 100 actually graduated.¹ The circular further suggests that no states are without this problem. In those whose high schools had the highest holding power (Iowa, Utah and Wisconsin, one-fourth of the students withdrew between the ninth and twelfth grades; the low states lost half their students in the same period.

¹ Gaumnitz, Walter H., and Tompkins, Ellsworth, *Holding Power and Size of High School*, Circular No. 322, Federal Security Agency, Office of Education, Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 1950, pp. 3, 4.

Information provided by the Illinois holding power study shows that even within one state there is a wide variation among schools. One of the participating schools found that seven students had dropped out for each ten who reached the twelfth grade while the school with the lowest rate of elimination had lost only one student for each ten who became seniors.

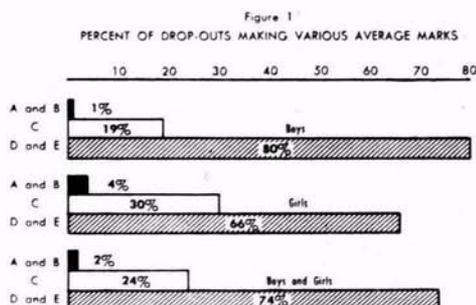
Facts similar to these have been reported from a sufficient number of studies so that two conclusions seem inescapable for schools designed to serve all the school-age youth of their communities. First, the number of drop-outs in many schools is sufficiently large so that the needs of the pupils who have withdrawn should be taken into account in improving the school's program. Second, the variation in the proportion of drop-outs from school to school is so great that each school must study its own holding power.

The holding power study of the Illinois Secondary School Curriculum Program was designed to provide the individual school with an easy method of conducting its own investigation of the problem of drop-outs. In the course

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of constructing the self-study materials, a preliminary study,² conducted in 22 four-year senior high schools, furnished in a variety of forms the answer to a question of major significance to guidance planning: Had the students who withdrew been assured by the school that they were doing well or had they been labeled with the stamp of failure?

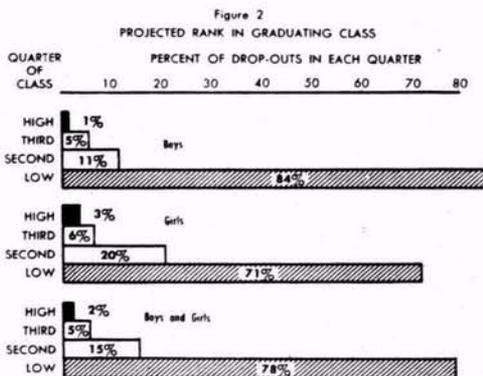
The most common of these labels of success or failure are, of course, the marks the student makes in his subjects



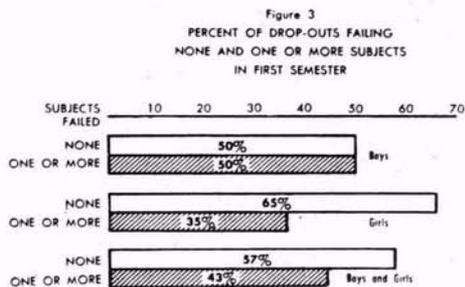
of study. Not only are marks given in most schools, but various devices are used to give these symbols a high order of importance among students. Marks are reported to students and their parents at frequent intervals; a minimum

² The method of the study is to compare the drop-outs from one or more classes as they pass through the school with those who continue in school as to a number of characteristics believed to be of significance in planning the learning experiences of pupils. Detailed suggestions for conducting the study may be found in: Allen, Charles M., *How to Conduct the Holding Power Study*, Circular Series A, No. 51, Illinois Secondary School Curriculum Bulletin No. 3, Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Springfield, Illinois, 1949.

A more general discussion of the findings of the preliminary phase of this study and a number of others related to it is given in: Hand, Harold C., *Principal Findings of the 1947-1948 Basic Studies of the Illinois Secondary School Curriculum Program*, Circular Series A, No. 51, Illinois Secondary School Curriculum Program Bulletin No. 2, Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Springfield, Illinois, 1949.



average mark is required for participation in certain attractive extracurricular activities; low marks delay the student's graduation and may require him to repeat courses; students with high average marks are granted honors and often special privileges; and in conferring with students, teachers frequently point out the necessity of good marks if the student is to achieve the vocational and social goals the teacher believes to be desirable. In view of such practices it is understandable that stu-



dents commonly accept school marks as evidences of their success or failure.

What Do the Marks Show?

Each of the schools in the Illinois study reported school marks³ for each of their drop-outs who had stayed in school

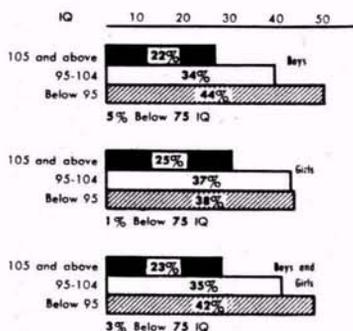
³ Eighty-seven per cent of the 847 drop-outs did stay in school long enough to receive first semester marks.

long enough to get marks with the results shown in Figure 1. With a mark of "C" on a five-point scale regarded as average, it was found that the average marks actually received by 80 per cent of the boys and 66 per cent of the girls who withdrew were below this letter. It might be expected that, for the whole student body, the groups receiving above average and below average marks would be about equal in numbers, but Figure 1 indicates that among the drop-outs only one per cent of the boys and four per cent of the girls had marks above "C."

The failure of a large proportion of the drop-outs to achieve even average success in their class work is further demonstrated by the rank these students would have held in the graduating class in each of their schools. The reports from the schools, summarized in Figure 2, indicate that the grades made by 84 per cent of the boys and 71 per cent of the girls who withdrew would have placed them in the low quarter of their graduating classes. Only one per cent of the boys and three per cent of the girls would have ranked in the upper quarter.

Figure 3 provides still another bit of evidence on the same point. Half of

Figure 5
PERCENT OF DROP-OUTS HAVING VARIOUS INTELLIGENCE QUOTIENTS

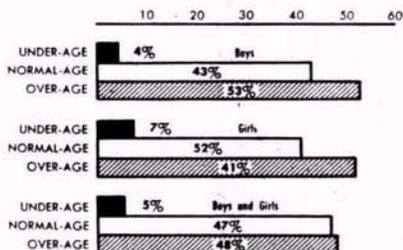


the boys and a third of the girls who withdrew had received failing marks in their first semester of high school work—their initial experience with the high school.

We can add to the picture by examining the evidence on age for grade, summarized in Figure 4. About half the boys and girls were of normal age (13 years, 8 months to 14 years, 7 months) when they entered the ninth grade. We might expect the remainder to be divided equally between over- and under-age groups, but this was not the case. Among the boys, 53 per cent were over-age, while only four per cent were under the normal age. Among the girls, 41 per cent were over-age and seven per cent under-age. The reasons for this heavy proportion of over-age students were not available from the schools, but one may surmise that a major factor had been the repeating of one or more grades in the elementary school.

Here then, we have a group of boys and girls a large proportion of whom had received notice almost from their admission to high school that they were not measuring up to the expectations of the school. The high percentage of over-age youth leads one to suspect

Figure 4
PERCENT OF DROP-OUTS OVER- AND UNDER-AGE IN NINTH GRADE



Under-Age: 13 years, 7 months and younger | at time of
Over-Age: 14 years, 8 months and older | entering ninth grade

that experience with failure in the class situation had, for many of them, started before they entered high school. It is also worth while noting that in each of the measures cited girls seemed to have an advantage over boys; significantly smaller proportions of girls received low marks, were over-age and had failed subjects.

The question may be asked: Were these young people educable? Perhaps they were of such a low order of intelligence that they were not fitted for high school work.

The information provided by the schools on their drop-outs shows that most of them were of sufficiently high intelligence to do high school work, although they were heavily concentrated in the below average part of the range. Only five per cent of the boys and one per cent of the girls were reported as having intelligence quotients below 75, but 44 per cent of the boys and 38 per cent of the girls had IQs below 95, as shown in Figure 5.

The use of intelligence test scores as measures of educability has received considerable attention, largely as a result of research findings that such tests provide low scores for children of the lower social classes.⁴ These low scores have been found to be reasonably dependable predictors of the success of children of lower social classes in conventional schools but other types of evidence have indicated⁵ that many schools are so organized as to give the best serv-

ice to children from middle class families.

In this connection it was found that among the drop-outs considered in the Illinois study, the fathers of 69 per cent of the boys and 75 per cent of the girls were skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled laborers. It seems possible that many of these former students whose parents were near the low end of the socioeconomic scale were more educable than their intelligence test scores indicate, particularly if one believes that schools should attempt to meet the needs of *all* their clientele.⁶

The most striking conclusion to be drawn from the Illinois holding power study is that a large proportion of the youth who withdrew had been labeled as failures in the major enterprise of the school—the activity that is built around the classroom.

One implication of these findings for those planning guidance programs is that the potential drop-out should be discovered and provided with counseling before he takes himself finally out of the school. Guidance specialists may be inclined, however, to overlook a second and equally important duty. They must join with others to provide potential school leavers with in-school learning experiences which they will accept as meeting their needs.

Whatever the school's failures in teaching these former students, it has taught them one lesson very effectively: that school is not for them. That they have learned their lesson well is demonstrated by one convincing fact—they are no longer in school.

⁴ Eells, Kenneth; Davis, Allison; Havighurst, Robert J.; Herrick, Virgil E.; and Tyler, Ralph W., *Intelligence and Cultural Differences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 37, 1951.

⁵ Davis, Allison, *Social-Class Influences Upon Learning*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1949.

⁶ For a discussion of this point see the chapter by Ralph W. Tyler in *Intelligence and Cultural Differences*, cited in footnote 4.

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