

Curriculum Research

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THEY "ALL" go to high school—but they don't all finish. While this statement surely comes as no surprise to most educators, a cold look at some hard facts jolts many. Michigan educators have looked at the problem of school leavers for some time; this is the story of what they are doing through action research to improve the holding power of their schools.

The holding power of our public schools is a matter of concern to many. Nationally, the facts on school leavers are more than disturbing. Only slightly more than half of those enrolled in the fifth grade complete the twelfth grade. The great majority of the youth who drop out of school are educable. A significant percentage have high academic abilities. These facts have not escaped recognition. Two years ago the National Council of Chief State School Officers labelled the drop-out problem as one of the top three concerns facing educators today. Last year the American Association of School Administrators in its annual national meeting gave realistic recognition to the need for improvement in school holding power. This fall President Eisenhower urged that citizens move to reduce the problem of youth illiteracy which so grievously affects the nation's military manpower resources.

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Michigan gathered its own facts in 1951. Acting on a recommendation of the Michigan Committee on School Holding Power, the Department of Public Instruction collected holding power data from local school superintendents. Forms which the department distributed made provision for analyzing the holding power of the freshman class of 1947, following this class through to graduation in 1951, and allowing for "transfers-in" and "transfers-out." Other relevant data sought included occupational, religious and racial complexes of the respective communities; information on the school program; and parent, teacher and community attitudes toward early school leavers.

This study achieved several goals: (a) it helped to draw the attention of educators and citizens to the drop-out problem, (b) it stimulated local efforts to improve school holding power, and (c) it provided significant data essential to the upgrading of educational programs in Michigan schools.

Based upon responses from 416 communities which are broadly representative of the state, the average holding power of Michigan secondary schools is 73%. Another way to state the fact is to say that one of every four young people who begin the ninth grade in Michigan public secondary schools leaves school prior to graduation. A third perspective is to realize that the number of youth who leave high school

each year in Michigan is greater than the number who begin college each year in the state. Unfortunately, many high schools continue to operate what are essentially college preparatory programs.

An Action Program

Accepting the obvious challenge, Michigan has moved into an organized action program—but the state first established its position by realizing that (a) some pupils probably should leave school, (b) too many pupils become dropouts, (c) change is brought about on the local level, (d) the school cannot “go it alone” since societal forces transcend educational boundaries, and others.¹ This action program involves many influential education forces in the state including professional organizations, conferences, workshops and teacher training institutions, as well as the Department of Public Instruction and its advisory committees. This year the “holding power story” will be presented to students in teacher training institutions, teachers and citizens at conferences and workshops, school administrators at area meetings, and to many others.

One of the first steps in the program is the stimulation of local studies. Since 1951, at least a hundred schools have undertaken studies of holding power in their own communities. Many have uncovered significant information and are developing improved programs based upon their findings. Grand Ledge through broad curriculum improvement raised its holding power rate to 86%; ten years ago it was 31%.² Ann Arbor found significantly heavier attrition among its non-resident pupils,

Negroes and nonparticipants in its co-curricular program.³ Grand Rapids rediscovered the importance of peer relationships and adult encouragement.⁴ Battle Creek⁵ and Royal Oak⁶ reported the importance of social adjustment. Dowagiac⁷ found a high incidence of broken homes, as did Monroe.⁸ Dearborn found that many more girls than boys dropped from one of its high schools, in contrast to the other.⁹ Flint found that female drop-outs tend to remain in school somewhat longer than male drop-outs.¹⁰ Manistee recorded the “great need for the teacher’s understanding the child’s need, interest and ability, and then to do something about them.”¹¹ The study of the four St. Clair Area schools showed one of the four to be significantly superior in holding power.¹² Based upon the responses of more than 2000 pupils in cooperative occupational training programs throughout the state, it was found that the opportunity to participate in this type of school-supervised work-experience program influenced more than two of every five to remain in school longer.¹³

These studies are finding a variety of uses. First, they are being used as a basis for program improvements in the schools which made them. Second, information from them is being disseminated to other schools which are interested in the holding power problem. Third, excerpts from them have been printed in various brochures and journals as a matter of professional interest. Fourth, they have contributed to a growing body of knowledge on school holding power and the drop-out. Fifth, certain community case studies are proving helpful in training teachers.

Meanwhile, the Michigan Committee on School Holding Power is regularly telling its story. The committee has been helpful in the publishing of two bulletins, *Michigan Holding Power Study*¹⁴ and *Improving Your School's Holding Power*.¹⁵ Representatives of the committee plan to meet this year with the faculties and, perhaps, with some students, in two of the teacher training institutions. Three such meetings have already produced desirable results. Two guidance associations in the state are programming holding power topics this year with the assistance of the committee. Area conferences sponsored by the respective associations of the Michigan Secondary School-College Agreement Program give regular consideration to the developing understanding of holding power and the schools' efforts to improve it. Unique success has been found in the committee's action program of collecting published information on the topic, reprinting it by permission, and making it available in kit form to communities and individuals.

The task ahead continues to grow in keeping with accumulated learnings. A doctoral study, undertaken with the support of the Michigan Committee on School Holding Power, will provide new clues to coping with the task. Some measure of success is patent since the holding power of Michigan's schools has doubled in the past twenty-three years.

References

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¹⁴ *Michigan Holding Power Study*, Bulletin No. 414. Department of Public Instruction, Lansing, Michigan, 1952. 8 p.

¹⁵ *Improving Your School's Holding Power*. C. L. Taylor, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Lansing, Michigan, 1954. 16p.

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