

Action on Dropouts

The U.S. economy cannot afford to wait for research results before doing something about our exorbitant dropout rate; schools must focus immediately on the students they are most likely to lose—low-income, white males enrolled in vocational programs.

What are the practical implications of some of the things we know about dropouts?

- Fifty-one percent of the males but only 33 percent of female dropouts do so because they "dislike school" (Morgan, 1984).

- Black youth who are poor *stay in school* more often than poor white youth (Barro, 1984).

- More students drop out from vocational than from academic programs (Barro, 1984).

- Grade retention and age upon entering 9th grade are both strongly related to dropping out (Barro, 1984).

- Ten percent of dropouts eventually drop back in: 6 percent of all dropouts get GEDs, and 90 percent of that group go on to postsecondary education (Morgan, 1984).

What we do about dropouts is of more than academic interest. Previous generations of retirees had as many as 17 currently employed workers paying into the Social Security Trust Fund; if you retire after the year 2000, your Social Security check will rest on just three workers, one of whom will be from a minority group. Almost half of some groups never get a high school diploma. Can we afford that loss?

In February, the American Can Company Foundation supported a national conference on secondary school holding power and dropouts. The experience of a dozen cities and towns teaches us three lessons:

1. This problem is political dynamite. School leaders are justly apprehensive about adding more public criticism in an area of weak and uncertain solutions applied to a group of young people whom many believe to be undeserving.

2. There is no alchemical powder that turns dropouts into Westinghouse semi-finalists.

3. Even asking the question, "What works?" is premature because no one can tell how many young people drop out, why, what is done about it, or to what effect. If you doubt that, ask a group of superintendents to cite individual district dropout rates.

Natriello's article (see p. 10) raises troubling questions about the consequences of our lust to legislate quality. Hospitals determine who will be helped in a disaster according to triage

plans. Children with fatal injuries will be turned away while young adults with superficial problems will be treated and released, hopefully to care for others. Like it or not, raising standards while cutting budgets forces us deeper into the triage business. One sign particularly evident at the national level is a tendency to "teach the best and to hell with the rest."

There are two parts to the dropout problem: knowing what to do and



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doing it. When Americans care about something they count it—calories, horsepower, runs batted in by left-handed pitchers in postseason games played at night. “Dropout,” “pushout,” “stopout,” “early school leaver,” “truant,” “failed to return,” and “expelled”—each label suggests a different etiology. But when Phi Delta Kappa sought to construct a consensus definition, they had to conclude, “We simply cannot agree what a dropout

is” (Barber, n.d.).

Better practice ought not wait on more research. This is one of the areas in which action creates understanding. The clock that measures our efforts is calibrated with young people. Fifteen percent is a conservative estimate of the dropout rate for a city school system. In midsized cities such as Boston, St. Louis, and Indianapolis, that means about 20 students drop out each week. If you are charged to “do

something” about that, you might begin with a survey of existing practices, which could take a month (and 80 dropouts); a needs assessment will take two more months to circulate and analyze (160 more dropouts); writing a program and getting board approval could take three more months (and 240 more young people gone). Thus, 480 students would drop out before anything different is even *tried*. Our efforts in every domain—staff development, curriculum improvement, teacher supervision, pupil progress assessment—are measured by time and money *and* by what happens and does not happen to children and youth. The consequences of what we do will reveal our vision of fairness.

“... I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he ...” □

References

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