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School Reform and Potential Dropouts

The main reasons students drop out of school are poor grades and family and money problems. Raising standards for time spent in school, content of the curriculum, and amount of homework may further compound students' problems and cause even more of them to drop out.

School leaders have cause for both celebration and caution. Education has finally returned to the forefront of policy discussions at the state and national levels, and educators have both an opportunity and a responsibility to secure increased support for American schools. However, as with all widespread movements, the current reform effort has its own direction and momentum; while it directs attention to certain problems in schools, it may divert much-needed attention from problems that are equally pressing, such as the growing number of high school dropouts.

The Severity and Nature of the Dropout Problem

Nearly one-third of respondents in a 1979 national survey of school administrators cited early dropouts as a problem in their districts; over half of the administrators in districts with more than 25,000 students reported that early dropouts are a problem.

While reliable statistics on school attendance are difficult to obtain, it is estimated that approximately 25 percent of all 18-year-olds have not graduated from high school. Although different sources present different figures, this rate has remained fairly stable over the last decade. Most youngsters who drop out do so after they have entered the 9th grade (Dearman and Plisko, 1979).

The economic costs of dropping out are also difficult to estimate, but Levin (1972) projected \$71 billion of lost tax revenue from high school dropouts aged 25-34, welfare and unemployment costs of \$3 billion, and crime and crime prevention costs of \$3 billion.

Students drop out of high school for a variety of often interrelated reasons, which generally fall into three major categories:

1. *Poor academic performance*, primarily low grades, is the most common reason students leave high school. Students who perform at one or more years below grade level or have failed one or more grades are most likely to drop out. In addition to poor grades and academic performance, expulsion

and suspension also indicate school problems that lead to dropping out. It is not surprising that students who do not perform well in school seek to leave the environment that provides negative feedback.

2. *Conditions in the student's family* can lead to an increased likelihood of dropping out. Students from single-parent homes are twice as likely to drop out of school as are students living with both parents, and eight of ten teenage mothers under the age of 17 never finish high school.

3. *Economic issues*, such as a disadvantaged family background, also increase the probability of dropping out; and many students report leaving school to go to work. Twenty-five percent of all 14-year-olds and over 50 percent of all 17-year-olds were employed at least part-time in 1979 (Michael and Tuma, 1983). High school seniors who worked averaged 15 to 18 hours of work per week, and very intensive work involvement is associated with higher rates of dropping out for at least some groups of youths (D'Amico, 1984). Serious economic pressures lead many students to drop out of school.

The Current School Reform Movement: The Commissions and Their Omissions

In examining the current movement for school reform and its implications for potential dropouts, we must con-

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"If school administrators are to be held accountable for the performance of their schools, they should hold governors, legislators, and national commissions accountable for the effectiveness of their reform policies."

consider the national commission reports that generated the latest wave of school reform and the responses of policymakers to the recommendations made in these reports. Both almost totally ignore the dropout problem in considering ways to improve education. Recommendations to raise standards fall into three broad areas:

1. *Course content.* The National Commission on Excellence (1983) advocates five new basics: four years of English; three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies; and one-half year of computer science. Other reports have advocated more science and mathematics courses (National Science Board Commission, 1983) or the elimination of the soft, nonessential courses (Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1983), but the general message is the same: students should pursue more demanding sequences of basic courses. If these recommendations are implemented, students will have fewer choices in selecting courses, and curriculums will offer a more restricted range of courses. While seldom fully adopting the commissions' recommendations, at least 40 states have increased the number of academic

courses required for high school graduation (Fiske, 1984).

2. *The use of time for instruction and learning.* The National Commission on Excellence and the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth recommend longer school days and years. The National Science Board Commission also suggests a longer school week to provide the time necessary for increased science and mathematics instruction. Both the National Commission on Excellence and the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth argue for increases in homework requirements and attention to attendance requirements. They are joined by Goodlad (1983) in stressing that better use should be made of in-school time.

The state-level response has typically concerned increasing in-school time. Twenty-three states have taken steps to increase the time students spend in school (Fiske, 1984). Local districts have moved to establish or increase homework requirements; for example, Oklahoma City's new homework policy requires 30 minutes of homework each night for elementary students and two hours each night for high school students (U.S. Department of Education, 1984).

3. *Student achievement.* Both the National Commission on Excellence and the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth have called for the use of grades solely to indicate achievement, not as motivational devices reflective of student effort. A second form of achievement standard calls for the end of social promotion and the use of rigorous grade promotion policies by which students will be promoted only when it is academically justified (National Commission on Excellence, 1983; National Science Board Commission, 1983; Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1983). Finally, several reports have recommended the use of standardized tests to monitor student achievement at specified intervals. Boyer (1983) argues for the use of a language proficiency test prior to high school admission with remediation of any deficiencies during the summer. The

National Commission on Excellence recommends the use of achievement tests at major transition points, particularly in the move from high school to college. The Task Force on Education for Economic Growth advocates periodic testing of achievement and skills.

State-level activity in this area actually pre-dated the recent commission reports. In the late 1970s, states started requiring testing of students to ensure certain levels of achievement. By 1984, 29 states had established some type of testing program, and 13 additional states were considering adopting one (U.S. Department of Education, 1984). While the standards set by many states may appear low, these tests represent yet another hurdle for students hoping to graduate from high school.

Taken together, the call for higher standards in curriculum content, learning time, and achievement levels seems to be based on five assumptions: (1) current standards are too low, (2) more demanding content and more time allocated to school will lead to greater individual student effort, (3) greater student effort will lead to improved achievement, (4) the relationships between standards and effort and between effort and achievement will hold for all students, and (5) no negative consequences will be associated with the more demanding standards. These assumptions, like the specific commission recommendations based on them, fail to consider our population at risk—potential dropouts.

Higher Standards and Potential Dropouts

In an analysis of data from the Educational Testing Service's Study of Academic Prediction and Growth, Alexander and Pallas (1984) showed that although the overall advantages of increasing core requirements in the "new basics" are clear, these core requirements seem to have little effect on the performance of students with relatively low grade point averages. In fact, they conclude that the lowest performing youngsters are apparently a little bit better off outside the core.

Not only the substance, but the re-

sulting form of the curriculum—a single pattern of courses taken by most students—may also have negative effects. The core curriculum is mainly composed of academic courses, all of which tap ability along a narrow range. Implementing the new curriculum requirements will restrict the variation in school experiences for students, limit the number of dimensions of ability deemed legitimate within the school, and curtail student choice in constructing a program of study. Potential dropouts, typically students with limited ability along this one dimension, may have to face repeated failure with little opportunity to engage in other school activities that might afford them some sense of success.

Increasing the time students spend on school tasks does seem to have positive effects on learning, even for students likely to be potential dropouts. For example, Keith (1982), in an analysis of data from the High School and Beyond Study, found that low-ability students who do one to three hours of homework weekly achieve grades commensurate with those of average students who do no homework. The problem is not that increased time on school tasks is ineffective; rather, the problem is motivating students to spend additional time on school tasks.

Longer school days and years may not result in greater time on school tasks, as these increases may require additional breaks, and teachers and students may encounter problems with fatigue. An additional 30 minutes at the end of the school day or an additional week at the end of the school year may add little to real learning time. Moreover, such demands may be problematic for potential dropouts, who are more likely than other students to have assumed adult responsibilities related to families and jobs. Furthermore, increasing time spent on school work and homework may prevent participation in extracurricular activities, thus denying students who do not perform well in the classroom access to activities that build a normative attachment to the school

and provide avenues of success (Otto and Alwin, 1977). Increasing the time demands on potential dropouts may present them with a severe conflict that may be most easily resolved by leaving school.

The impact of higher achievement standards on potential dropouts is apparently mixed. A series of studies reported by Natriello and Dornbusch (1984) found that students in classrooms with very low standards were more likely to cut class than students in classrooms with more demanding standards. Moreover, a higher demand level in the classroom was found to be associated with greater student effort even when the students' ability level was controlled. In the low-demand classrooms, the highest proportion of students reported that they felt the teacher should make them work harder. However, these studies also showed that high-demand classrooms often lose low-ability students, who try less hard when the pace is too fast.

These dual effects of raising achievement standards, (sometimes challenging students, sometimes frustrating them) appear in the limited information we have on the impact of minimal competency testing. While systematic, evaluative studies on the impact of minimal competency testing are currently unavailable, the failure rates on such tests are clearly much higher for economically disadvantaged and minority students, two sociodemographic groups with high dropout rates (Jaeger, 1982). If academic standards are raised and students are not provided substantial remediation within the limited time they can devote to school tasks, socially and academically disadvantaged students will be more likely to experience frustration and failure, which can result in notable increases in dropping out.

Implications for School Administrators

If we are to avoid some of the serious negative effects of the current reforms on potential dropouts, discussions of the problem that have been uncommon at the national and state levels must become common at the district

and building levels. It is there that the dropout problem cannot be ignored. Accordingly, we suggest that school administrators:

1. *Redouble efforts to monitor dropouts at the district and building level.* It is difficult and time consuming to collect valid information on students who leave high school prior to graduation; they often disappear without formal warning, becoming invisible problems. To fully understand the dimensions and patterns of their particular dropout problems, local administrators must collect systematic information on students who drop out, and use it in at least three ways. First, internal variations in the patterns of dropouts within schools and districts can alert administrators to potential policies that might encourage students to complete their high school education. Second, information collected on dropout rates can, over time, help in understanding the impact of changes such as those currently being implemented as part of the current wave of reforms. Third, hard evidence on the magnitude of the dropout problem can be used to bring the dropout problem to the attention of state and national policymakers.

2. *Insist on adequate evaluation of the new reform policies.* Careful program evaluation is expensive and time consuming; yet it is essential to judging the efficacy of changing standards for performance. While individual districts and schools can monitor the impact of new policies on their students, only state-level evaluation efforts can examine their impact across districts within a state, and only national evaluation efforts can examine the impact of diverse state policies on schools and districts in various states. If school administrators are to be held accountable for the performance of their schools, they should hold governors, legislators, and national commissions accountable for the effectiveness of their reform policies. Despite the tone of the recent commission reports and the quick action by various states, it is not clear how to raise standards for uniformly good effect.

3. *Insist that effects on potential dropouts be considered in any assessments of the reforms.* To assess the true impact of the reforms in terms of aggregate outcome measures requires the use of what we refer to as a "full-enrollment" approach in calculating such measures, as opposed to a "survivor" approach, as is typically done at present. The survivor approach includes final outcome scores only for those students who remain enrolled through the 12th grade, or whenever outcome measures are collected. Under a full-enrollment approach, aggregate performance measures would include scores of students who dropped out of school before graduation. Scores for dropouts might be estimated on the basis of their earlier test scores and background characteristics. In any case, such an approach would reduce aggregate scores by making them reflective of outcomes for both students who graduate and those who drop out. This would prevent policymakers from claiming as successful those reforms that simply rid the schools of students with performance problems.

4. *Continue to serve potential dropouts with special programs that have proven successful in the past.* While there has been relatively little systematic evaluation of many of these programs, certain features appear to work well with potential dropouts, including (1) relatively small programs or schools that offer more responsive environments for students; (2) individualized curriculums and instructional approaches that tailor course content and mode and pace of instruction to the aptitudes and interests of students; and (3) learning climates characterized by clear and fair rules, reward systems reflective of individual student effort and progress, and a normative emphasis on academic excellence (U.S. Department of Justice, 1980).

5. *Provide educational services with flexible time options.* Our analysis suggests that potential dropouts are subject to severe time constraints. Since the economic and family demands placed on such students typically cannot be alleviated, school administrators should modify the time demands the educational system places on them by experimenting with programs that are less concentrated and of longer

duration. It may be reasonable for many potential dropouts to achieve higher standards by planning to participate in high school for an additional year, thereby reducing their course load. It would be important to remove the stigma of failure from such an option; planning to remain in high school part-time for an additional year should have a different meaning than being retained in a grade and repeating a full course load. College administrators have grown accustomed to students who stretch out their undergraduate careers without any sense of failure, and high school administrators should be encouraged to do the same. Only in this way will many potential dropouts escape the severe time conflicts that prevent them from doing well initially and benefiting from remedial services when necessary.

Conclusion

We have listed a full and heavy agenda of responsibilities for district- and building-level administrators. Parents, the local community, and state and national policymakers may be enlisted to help, but recent experience suggests that it is *local educational leaders* who will have to keep the dropout problem in the public eye. □

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